THE LOOMS OF TIME

THE "GOOD WORDS" CHRISTMAS STORY

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ILLUSTRATED BY LANCELOT SPEED

"Though the mills of God grind slowly,
Yet they grind exceeding small."

PROLOGUE

The sun was blazing pitilessly on the parched mountains, shrivelling and cracking the earth from their ribs. Distorted lumps of prickly pear and swords of aloe stretched across the path from time to time as if to warn the travellers to go no further on that breathless quest. Below, in ravines scorched bare by the sun, masses of powdery stones chased each other down the dusty watercourses where not a drop of moisture had trickled for ten months past. Far away, where the mountains opened to the plain, a dry dazzling haze quivered under the midday sun, whose rays glanced unbearably bright from the sword hilts and cuirasses of the Spanish Commander and his men, and seemed to strike weals of fire across the naked copper-coloured bodies of the Indians whom they were driving—at the sword's point—up the narrow track, which still climbed away from them among the burning peaks of the Cordillera.

"Por Dios!" exclaimed Don Salathiel to his lieutenant, where a slight broadening of the path allowed them to walk abreast, "this is worse than the Jucara in July!" and he wiped his brow with the end of his baldric and lifted his steel cap an inch or two from his head. He was a dark, spare man with grizzled hair, black eyes still full of fire and energy, and features which must have been comely before they were scorched and hardened by war and exposure. He stood at ease for a moment, leaning on his sword and attentively scanning the seamed hill sides. Except that slight moisture on his forehead, he showed no signs of fatigue, and though he must have been quite fifty years old, held himself erect, and stepped lightly over the scorching soil.

The man at his side, though twenty years his junior, was already defeated by the long climb in the appalling heat. He was from the soft orange coasts of Valencia, and less fitted for hardship than the old soldier of the Asturias. His face was white and drawn, with purple marks round nostrils and mouth.

"Señor Comandante," he gasped, "have pity—on your own men—this is murder!"

"What, vanquished already, Don Garcia?" laughed the other, turning to look at him. "See what it is to live in luxury among rivers and orange-gardens!"

"For the love of heaven, speak not of rivers now!" said Garcia in a husky voice,

looking round hopelessly on the glaring hills. "I would give my right hand for a drink from the well in the patio of my home!"

His voice broke dangerously, and he ended with something like a sob.

"Now that is foolish!" said the Captain sternly. "We shall reach water soon—the Indians have sworn it, and they know what awaits them if they deceive us. And after the water—gold!"

His eyes gleamed covetously from under his dusty eyelashes.

"Give me water, and these devils may keep their gold," said young Garcia de Las Vegas, and then there was silence as the company continued the weary climb. They went in strange order, a long chain of men in single file, since the path was narrow, a bare scratch on the side of the Cordillera, which sank below them in dizzy straightness and rose above in a blank inaccessible wall. A scarred and gray-haired Indian led the troop unwillingly. His hands were bound, the soldier behind him held the loose end of the cord, and his back was bleeding in more than one place from the urgings of his captor's sword. Seven others followed—each bound to and led by a Spaniard, who, parched, baked, and covered with dust, cursed their luck, their commander, and their victims by turn. Had each known how near his fellow was to mutiny, the band would have turned like one man and have carried its leaders down the hill by force. Don Salathiel knew, and sternly bade them keep their breath for their work, when he saw them turn to address one another across the shoulders of the intervening Indians. Then once more he would speak to his lieutenant in cheerful tones of the gold they would surely find where their prisoners were leading them, and as the magic word passed from mouth to mouth the Spaniards found courage for a few more scorching steps.

Now they had reached a point where a kind of valley divided the hills, which towered in a precipitous wall on either side, giving out dazzling refractions of heat and glare under the noonday sun, and ending in volcanic ridges, black as burnt coals, whose every tooth stood out clearly against the white hot air. As the men rounded a jutting wall of rock a wild shout of "Agua" ran down the line, and they dashed furiously forward, to where, in a depression of the valley, a dark red pool gleamed in the sunshine. The Indians also gave a curious cry, which was answered by fitful echoes calling once and again from the jutting rocks. The Spaniards, still holding the ropes which bound the captives, threw themselves madly on their knees and dipped their faces deep in the water, but not a man of the Indians bowed to drink of the stagnant flood whose sinister colour and glazed surface made it look like a pool of blood.

Only Don Salathiel, who had waited to fill a battered cup ere he drank (when he had tasted the bitter water he threw it away sputtering) noticed the quick upward glance of two or three of the men towards the rocks on the right, only he heard a low call, too late to be an echo, which caused the two leaders of the Indian band to lay their ears back to their heads like a horse waiting for the voice of his master. Roughly the commander smote his men on the shoulders, bidding them rise and only drink by turns if they would not be murdered by the black devils even as they drank. One or two stood up, but growled surlily that they had not enlisted for this kind of service, and that nothing should induce them to go another step if all the gold in Castile were to be won by it.

Don Salathiel shrugged his shoulders and smiled at them in a pitying manner.

"Foolish children," he said, "do you not see that for me it is far better that you should not come? Why should I share this treasure with you, who will but waste and wrangle over it? 'Tis true that I promised all should share alike, according to the command of our most Christian Sovereigns, but, since you are so rich, so fortunate, that you do not need wealth and gold and jewels, well, I thank you, my children, and I will go on and take it for myself. This noble cavalier"—he stretched out his hand to Don Garcia—"will, of course, accompany me. We shall take the guide and the interpreter with us, and you can find your way back to the coast alone, and tell the Alcalde and the Admiral that, having deserted the service of our most Christian Sovereigns, you are to be hung like thieves and pirates from the yard-arm. Farewell."

He turned on his heel, and moved forward, Don Garcia following him silently. The men looked at him, at each other, at

the stolid Indians, and slowly, growling like unwilling dogs, they rose from the red slime where they had been sitting, ranged themselves in their old order, and followed also.

Don Salathiel had wiped heavy beads from his brow after he turned to leave them. Without them, his quest would be vain and most likely fatal, but he would carry it through. As he heard them rise, clanking their accoutrements, he would not glance back once to see which direction they were taking. Down hill, most like, dogs that they were, he told himself. Then he heard them coming nearer to him, and ventured on an undertone to his companion: "Do not look back!"

Don Garcia replied, "Bueno!" in the same low voice. Then, as the tramp took time, and became steady and united, Don Salathiel drew a deep breath and smiled under his dusty moustache.

The few moments' rest, the drink of water, and the threatened mutiny of the soldiers had given the younger man his nerve again, and he stepped out bravely by his leader's side. In two or three minutes Don Salathiel looked round as if nothing had happened, and asked a question of the interpreter—a young Indian who could speak a little Castilian. He translated it to the old man led by the first of the Spanish soldiers, and the line halted, for the guide turned and pointed to a narrow track leading off at right angles from the one they were following, towards a rift in the rocks which seemed to give a promise of shade. Then there was a short, sharp discussion between the guide and the interpreter, and finally the latter turned to Don Salathiel, and said unwillingly:

"The road lies there, to the right, between the rocks."

"Lead on," said the Commander, and the troop wheeled and took the rising path towards the rift. This was one of the deep cañons common in that volcanic country, so narrow that only two men could walk abreast, and so deep that the sun, having declined a little from the zenith, left the bottom dark and almost cool.

"Now God be praised!" said Don Salathiel. "Here is something to breathe! What ails you, Don Garcia?" he cried, as Garcia stumbled, fell sideways, and lay groaning against a boulder.

"The—pains—of hell!" sobbed Garcia, rolling over, white and writhing.

"A colic!" laughed Don Salathiel. "Come, come, my son, this is nothing but that foul water of which you drank so greedily! 'Twill pass—stand up, or the men will lose their courage!"

But Garcia, glassy-eyed, foam on his grey lips, and his limbs twisted in agony, rolled a little backwards down the path. As he did so, three other men fell out, one shrieking in horrible pain, one all but insensible, and one leaping like a madman and tearing away down the steep path. Each was seen to be severed from the Indian he had been leading, and these suddenly darted off, past Don Salathiel, who was stooping over the prostrate Garcia.

As the brown bodies flew past him, Don Salathiel sprang to his feet, gave a glance at them, another at his disordered troop, and, without an instant's hesitation, cut down the Indian nearest him, and shouted:

"Slay—for your lives, my children, you are betrayed!"

Hardly a man could draw his sword. The poisoned pool had done its work to the minute, and of all the little band, only two men who, like Don Salathiel, had barely tasted the water, were able to stand and defend themselves. Of the rest, some were rushing wildly down the gorge after the first maddened fugitives, some rolling over and biting the stones in uncontrollable agony, while two, who were already past moving, lay still where they had fallen.

Then a wild yell came ringing down the ravine, and about twenty Indians of the fierce Araucanian breed, rushed from between the narrow rocky walls a few hundred yards further up the pass. They were led by the man who had been acting as Don Salathiel's guide. The interpreter was standing by his side, and spoke to him:

"Kill thyself, captain—there is yet time!"

"Thee, first, traitor," said Don Salathiel; and then he flung the man's body on two that lay at his feet, making a kind of barricade in the narrow path between himself and the foe. He looked round to see if any of his own men could fight this last fight with him. The two who could stand stepped to his side, and then the Araucanians were upon them—before, behind,

around them, a yelling crowd of red-eyed fiends from hell.

The three stood back with drawn swords waiting for the Indians to rush—but these, sure of their prey, paused just out of the steel's reach. Don Salathiel had time to ask himself where those behind him had sprung from, for he was still facing the upward path. He and the brave fellows at his back knew that life's end had come, but there was still one joy left them. They would kill many of those devils first. Suddenly the Indians withdrew, creeping backwards like cats.

"Hast thou a shot in thy pistol, Miguel?" asked the Captain, without moving his eyes from those of the foremost foe, who paused, bent a little forward as if ready for a spring if the sword's point lowered for a moment.

"Yes, Señor Comandante," said the man.

"Keep it for thine own head when thou art taken, my son. And thou, Diego?"

"The same, and more rounds in my belt," replied the other Spaniard.

"Nay—no time to reload will be given thee. Kill all thou canst and then thyself. Neither God nor the Saints will call it sin. There would be a week of torture. Beware, they come!"

A flight of arrows hurtled over their heads. The Indians meant to distract their attention and throw them off their feet by a rush in under Don Salathiel's sword. At all costs they would take these three alive. The captain felt the man behind him stagger. An arrow had struck him in the eye—without killing him. He sank down and a cry from the savages announced their triumph. They attempted to pull him away, but his comrade's sword defended him for a few minutes. Don Salathiel felt him writhing on the ground close to his feet. The pass swarmed with Indians, thick as adders under a snake stone. The Commander loosened his heavy pistol, and turning for a second, put a shot through the wounded man's head, grinding his teeth at having to take Spanish blood. But the act of mercy was his own destruction, as he knew it might be. His comrade tried to defend him and threw away his own last chance by emptying his pistol at the foremost Indian, who fell silently forward. The others, who had been kept back by the fear of the firearms, broke over the two Spaniards and bore them down as the tide overwhelms a sand pile on the shore.

When Don Salathiel could look up and breathe again, he found that his sword-arm was broken, his sword gone, and all his limbs bound tight in twisted nets, so that he was helpless as a dead man. His comrade lay a few feet away from him in the same condition, and rolled his eyes beseechingly towards his leader, who had no words of comfort for him now. The Indians withdrew and held a parley—glancing from time to time at their prisoners. Don Salathiel had learnt a word or two of their dialect and recognised one sound again and again, "Gold, gold!"

He cursed the hour when he had heard of the hidden mine; cursed the hour when he had put his own life and the lives of his men in the hands of a few wronged prisoners—and then, seeing that hope was ended, he accepted his doom like a brave man, and tried to ask for the pardon of his many sins. His fellow sufferer seemed to have become delirious and was singing snatches of old vintage songs in a high screaming voice. One or two condors—the vulture of the Andes—came and perched on the hot rocks just above them, flapping their wings and craning their horrible raw necks. The dead lay around, and the Indians were talking still, in raucous tones. Far overhead the sky burnt white above the rocks.

The savages seemed to have come to some decision. They separated, and four of them came out from the group, two towards Don Salathiel and two towards his poor companion. They carried bundles of spears bound together with matting and ropes. To these the two prisoners were securely fastened and then raised from the ground. The ends of the spears rested on the shoulders of the Indians, who broke into a swinging trot, as they carried their captives, like slain deer, up the pass.

The movement caused terrible pain to Don Salathiel's broken arm, and after half an hour of this strange travelling he was thankful to find himself set down in the mouth of a cave, whose cool darkness came as an intense relief after the heat and glare. The man Diego was laid beside him, singing still, and the Indians turned their backs to them and sat in a half ring just inside the

mouth of the cave. They seemed tired. Don Salathiel knew, from a glimpse of mountain-top which he could catch from where he lay, that they were now high on the cliff side; all was open before them, and the air was thin and hard to inhale. Then he turned his eyes towards the inner part of the cave and saw that an irregular tunnel led off into the darkness, but—so near him that had his arm been free he could have touched it—gold quartz jutted in rich lumps from the rock, which was streaked and veined in long bands by the yellow metal. He had found it all at last, the water promised by the Indians—and that was poison—the gold which had seemed worth risking life itself for—and the gold would be his death.

He heard the word pass from mouth to mouth with hoarse laughs, and then some of those devils, as they seemed to him, turned and pointed at him. He lay quite still, hoping that they would think him dead—but they knew better. Suddenly they sprang up and ran towards him. Two took him roughly by the shoulders and set him on his feet, one tore off the binding nets so that he might walk, and then they hustled him down the dark passage all in a body, laughing wildly, and dragging Diego behind him. Even in that strait, Don Salathiel noticed the rich veins of gold showing up where here and there an opening had been pierced through the rocky roof. With all his rugged faith in another world, and his desire to reach it clean-handed since he must unfortunately leave this one, he felt the strongest pangs of covetousness when he passed so close to the much-desired treasure. It seemed to draw him against his will, and even overshadowed his apprehension as to what form of martyrdom lay before him.

Then the forward movement stopped. They had come to a spot where the tunnel widened into a kind of chamber, dimly lighted from a rift in the rocks overhead. Here strangely shaped basins and utensils lay about, and a rude smelting furnace was hewn in the stone, tended by one or two men who had apparently been waiting for the new comers to join them. At the further end of the rock chamber a square opening in the floor sank away from sight into the bowels of the earth. It was no shaft, but one of those natural openings often found in volcanic rocks. The furnace was blazing, and one of the Indians raised a pair of stone shovels from the ground and drew out a kind of bowl seething and throwing out sparks as it was set on the ground. It was full to the brim with molten gold, boiling and bubbling still. One of the captors made a sign as of pouring something down his throat, and, without looking round, jerked his thumb towards the Spaniards.

Then Don Salathiel knew what awaited him. In an instant he measured the distance to the opening of the shaft, and calculated his chance of reaching it before he was caught; the Indians (too sure of their prisoners to watch them) were still crowding round the furnace, and both he and Diego had their feet free. Diego was nodding his head wildly to his own strange croon, but even if he were mad, his Commander would not have him tortured. Don Salathiel's left arm was free. He reached and touched Diego with a whispered "Come." The habit of obedience was strong and the soldier nodded. Twining his arm round his comrade's body, Don Salathiel made one rush for the pit, paused on the brink, and, with his head thrown backwards, shouted "Cristo y Castilla" in a voice which rang like thunder through the place. And then, still holding his comrade to him, he sprang like a boy out into the blackness of the shaft, where death, quick and merciful, met the two ere the sound of their last fall rose dully to the ears of their defeated conquerors.

I

THE great liner had steamed out of Rio harbour, and the fairy islands and the green hills, the chattering negroes and screaming parrots, and piles of fruit were all left behind. After the two weeks' run from Vigo, every one had greeted land with rapture, and all who could leave the ship had rushed on shore to buy fruits and flowers, to laugh over the absurd currency which made them pay "two thousand kings" for a seat in the tramway to reach the Botanical Gardens. But, rather to the amusement of the officers, they had all come back fairly early, having found that Rio smelt of many things besides fruit and flowers; that, after all, there is nothing like one's own little corner on deck in the evening, and

that even steamer cabins may look comfortable by contrast with some other things.

A few new passengers had come on board to take the places of others who had been dropped. These, of course, were regarded as impertinent interlopers by the veterans who had come out all the way from Liverpool. The quartermaster had several sets of instructions (accompanied by tips) to the effect that no new chair was to be set in the spot sacred to any old one, otherwise parties would be broken up, relations separated, and those who were thinking of becoming related to each other dangerously hindered and thrown back in their negotiations. So the new arrivals' chairs were all planted together in a kind of penal settlement abaft the funnels, where the basket work soon cracked and popped like toy pistols with the heat.

The SS. *Corotaxi* had got well out to sea by twelve o'clock, and only the faintest line of coast was still visible, as it would be for some days to come in this clear weather. A fresh breeze was blowing along under the awnings, whirling ends of gauze veils into women's eyes, scattering sheaves of paper off some enthusiast's writing-pad to dance quadrilles in the scuppers, and bringing colour into the cheeks of little children, who had wilted like tired blossoms in the heat of the last few days.

As eight bells announced midday, there was a scraping and squeaking of bamboo chairs, thuds of falling books and cushions, and several couples began to pace the deck vigorously in the before-lunch constitutional canter.

By the wall of the smoking-room, as far forward as possible, a long chair was placed so that its occupant might be the first to meet the breeze. The lady had been there most of the morning, and was evidently in an unsociable mood, for there was nothing of her to be seen but two little red shoes lightly crossed under a sweep of white skirts. The rest was quite shut away from view by an enormous silk parasol.

In the white silence under the translucent dome, Mrs. Edmondson was dreaming with open eyes, her brown head was a little turned to one side, and the pallor of her round young cheeks pressed into the scarlet silk of her cushion. Her lips were parted in a half smile, and she seemed to be seeing pleasant pictures under her tent's roof. One slender hand, tanned to the tint of warm ivory, held her parasol; the other, rings and all, was shut into a book, which she had found impracticable on this lovely morning. The play of sun and wind threw dappling shadows on her brow and hands, and on the folds of her dress. Every now and then a breath crept under the points of the parasol, and blew the soft rings of her hair into her eyes.

She had come all the way from Liverpool, but now, after three weeks of travelling, her companions knew little of her beyond what they had learnt on the first day, and they would have liked to know a good deal more. She was bound for the West Coast —on business, as the captain curtly put it when asked. A person who looked less business-like than Mrs. Edmondson it would have been difficult to find. The captain knew all about her, and had reserved the seat at his right hand for her, greatly to the wrath of a wealthy Chilean lady who considered that she should have had the place of honour. Also the amidships cabin on the cool side, the largest in the ship, had been assigned to her, and the inquisitive tried to do a sum in the rule of three: what must be the income of one woman (not the wife of a director of the company) who paid three extra passages so as to have a four-berthed cabin to herself?

Gilda Edmondson seemed to be quite unaware of the little flutter of mystery which surrounded her in other people's eyes. She took everything for granted; made herself charming when she felt inclined to talk; got up and went away in the middle of a conversation when she had had enough of it. As a rule, she had enough of it early in the proceedings, and after that it was quite useless to attempt to draw her out of her shell. And—she would not speak to the people she did not like. The noisy men and girls gave up teasing her to join their games; the emaciated lady doctor could not get an answering spark out of her about the temperance crusade, and the man from the Falkland Islands, rough as his own polar sheep, found the impenetrable white parasol lowered on his side when he drew his chair close up to Mrs. Edmondson's, and prepared to give her his views on the South American Republics.

The only person who was never snubbed for disturbing her was a very ugly and fearfully naughty little boy, the child of a forlorn couple who, broken in purse, ill and discouraged, were going out to a "new opening" as the man put it, in one of the great business houses in Valparaiso. As the "House" paid his expenses he and his wife were travelling first class, and the ship had once or twice been hotly scandalised by their unkindness to their tiresome son. But Mrs. Edmondson had tamed the little man, and he would come and sit on the end of her chair for hours together, telling her of all the imaginary wickednesses that he would like to perpetrate. It was most unprincipled conduct on Mrs. Edmondson's part to sympathise with him as she did; nay, more than sympathise, for it is to be feared that she was to a certain extent responsible for some bold practical jokes which convulsed the community at large, but caused the lady doctor and the Falkland millionaire and one or two others to scowl severely when Ernie Wilson, sticky, smudgy, and black-fingered, pulled up in his career of crime by their deck-chairs. The culprit was never caught, for he found a never-failing refuge behind Mrs. Edmondson's parasol. Only two days ago, his father, exceeding wrath, sought him there to carry him off and administer corporal punishment, but Mrs. Edmondson looked sweetly up in the angry parent's face, and said that it was quite impossible that Ernie should just have put a dead pussy to bed in the berth of Miss Twemlow (the lady doctor), because he had been at her side the whole morning, reading her stories out of the *Boy's Own Paper*. She even suggested that Miss Twemlow had probably put poor kitty's corpse there herself, with a view to a little dissecting after tea. Then turning to the triumphant sinner at her side she said, "Go on, Ernie, we must finish that story before lunch, mustn't we?"

On this particular morning, Gilda had no desire even to talk to Ernie, and had ensured some hours of quiet by bringing him a vast provision of sweets from a negro confectioner's shop in Rio, which would keep him quiet all the morning and probably sulky all the afternoon. As the breeze stiffened, the talk behind her became more desultory, people took to silence and long chairs, some of the constitutionalists went below to prepare for lunch, and then the gong rang for that meal.

Gilda waited a moment to let the others get downstairs. Then the red shoes wheeled off the couch and came down together on the deck, the parasol shut with a click, and Mrs. Edmondson jumped up and walked towards the saloon stairs. She was tall and slender, and moved with the smoothness of strength.

"Oh, come, this is better! I am glad I got up," said a fever invalid from Rio, as he caught sight of the white-clad woman approaching the companion-way. He had crept upstairs to get a breath of fresh air before facing the indescribable atmosphere of the dining-room. Gilda came on rapidly, her eyes turned seawards, till she was close to the doorway. Then she found herself face to face with a sick and sunburnt boy, whose clear blue eyes gazed right into hers from a gaunt countenance the colour of old brown wax. His light hair was shorn close to his head, so that he looked very young. He was dressed in a loose suit of flannels, and had "Britisher" and "gentleman" written all over him.

Gilda was so unprepared for the encounter that she stopped short and uttered a little "Oh!"

"Just what I was going to say," remarked the boy, in a weak but jovial voice. "I am afraid I startled you. I thought everybody was downstairs."

"No; I was not startled," she said, recovering her composure, "but I had not seen you before. That was all." And she made as if she would pass.

"I only came on at Rio," he replied, "and they took me down below directly."

It seemed strange that he did not stand aside to let her pass. His lean hand was clinging fast to the door-post. People quickly make acquaintance at sea, and Gilda felt rather drawn towards this sick boy.

"Were you the man they brought on in a litter?" she asked, looking kindly at him. As he was about to answer, his face changed—assumed a grey hue behind the brown—and he staggered, putting up his other hand against the door and sinking his head on the back of it.

"What is the matter?" she cried, and then suddenly put out her arms to steady

him, for he seemed to be falling. With her help he fell the right way, on the divan inside the doorway. She removed one of the velvet bolsters so as to get it under his head, and with some hesitation undid the button of his collar. Then a wasted hand pushed her away and he opened his eyes, and said with a deprecating little chuckle:

"I—I'm not—drunk—stupid—faint—fever—don't y' know!" And then he gave it up and lay back against the hot velvet cushion grey and silent.

"You poor thing," said Gilda, "you ought not to have got up. I shall fetch you a glass of wine."

And having put another bolster to prop him up on the other side she ran down the few steps to the bar.

"Glass of port; quick!" she said to the barman who slowly pushed her a card and a pencil stump to write the order with. Mrs. Edmondson swept them away, and reaching across his counter for bottle and glass, poured out the wine, and flew upstairs with it to where her patient was lying. The quartermaster now stood in the doorway, looking at him.

"Looks bad, don't he, Miss?" he said as Gilda came up. "Looks as if he wouldn't get to Valparaiso, I say."

"Be quiet!" said Gilda angrily, "and don't go away; I want you."

Then she touched the sick man on the shoulder, and he looked up at her in a dazed fashion.

"Drink this," she said gravely.

"I—don't mind," he murmured, and swallowed the black draught. As he gave the glass back into her hand, he said: "So kind of you; awfully sorry to give so much trouble. Frightful muck—ship's port, isn't it?"

"Horrid rubbish," Gilda replied, laughing. "Now I am going to put you on a long chair outside. Can you walk? The quartermaster will give you his arm."

"Rather have yours," said the young man, as he pulled himself up to his feet and steadied his elbow on the sailor's palm; but Mrs. Edmondson ran on to where her own chair was standing, and tumbled out the shawls, books, opera-glasses and smelling salts in a mixed heap on the deck, shook up the cushions, and smiled as he stretched himself on them with a sigh of satisfaction.

"This is ripping," he said, looking up at her as he lay back; "how awfully good of you!"

"So glad I was there," she answered, with her hand on the top of the chair. She felt as if she had known him for years already. "Now I shall send you up a little lunch—which you will eat—like a good boy."

"If you want me to—" said the blue-eyed innocent on the couch.

"That has nothing to do with it," replied Gilda severely. "Here are the salts, and I shall put my parasol over the back of the chair for the sun. Now, don't move till I come up again!"

And she went away to find the steward. The quartermaster had already disappeared, and the invalid was left alone on Gilda's chair, covered with her soft rugs, a faint smell of lavender coming to his nostrils from the silk of the cushions, and—how compromising!—a box of Turkish cigarettes on a ledge close to his hand.

"What a nice girl!" he said to himself as the cool wind blew on his wasted face. "What a lucky beggar I am!"

Meanwhile the "nice girl" stopped on her way to lunch to learn the name of her new acquaintance from the chief steward.

"A gentleman that looks very young and very ill?" the steward asked. "Ah, that will be Captain McCalmont, come down from the Embassy at Petropolis; had yellow Jack. The doctor told me to be very careful he got plenty of beef tea."

"Captain!" said Gilda to herself, as she passed to her place, "yellow Jack! Why, the poor child must be about nineteen!"

"I was afraid you wasn't coming, Mrs. Edmondson," said Ernie Wilson, looking up with a pleased smile from a plate of wrecked fruit. "I've eaten ten bananas waiting for you. Did you be as quiet as you wanted this morning? Wasn't I good?"

"Splendidly good," said Gilda; "but then that was because of the lollipops! I'll play quoits with you after tea."

"Don't eat the lobster salad then, please," cried Ernie, clutching Gilda's arm as she was about to help herself to something. "It's tinned, and father's had to go and lie down already; and you wouldn't be able to play quoits if you did."

Having assured himself that she would soon follow him Ernie went upstairs, and

at once spied out the stranger lying in his goddess's chair. Reggie McCalmont started on being addressed in a small but angry pipe, which ordered him to "Get out of that!" He had almost dozed off over one of those consoling cigarettes, and looked up to find a dirty and toothless little boy, eight or nine years old, standing at the foot of the couch, with red anger written all over his face.

"Hullo!" Reggie replied sleepily. "What do you want?"

"Get up," said Ernie, with much decision. "You've taken my Mrs. Edmondson's chair—and her cushions—and her smokes, and I expect you're a thief."

"I dare say I should be if I couldn't get what I wanted," Reggie answered, laughing. He felt quite rested and strong now. "But you see I was asked; she told me to lie down here, and I didn't like to say no."

"That's different," said Ernie. "Even *I* mind Mrs. Edmondson, and we're great friends. You have to do what she wants, 'cause she is such a brick."

"Tell me about her," said the man on the couch. "Where is Mr. Edmondson? Does he smoke these?"

He moved a finger in the direction of the cigarettes.

"*She* does," Ernie admitted, "but only when all the old cats have gone to bed or are having their tea, and I promised I wouldn't tell. There isn't any Mr. She's——"

"A widow?" inquired Captain McCalmont.

"Why, no," said Ernie. "She wears white frocks and red shoes, but there's no Mr. at all anywhere. Oh, here she comes. Shall I get the quoits out now?" he cried as Gilda approached.

"Just after lunch?" she asked, gaily; "that would be worse than tinned lobster, Ernie. Are you all right?" she asked, coming close to the chair and looking down on Reggie. His face had lost its grey look and began to have quite a tinge of colour. He turned round and prepared to rise.

"As right as rain," he said. "It was so good of you to give me your chair. I have one somewhere; I'll go and find it."

"Please do nothing of the kind," said Mrs. Edmondson. "I never use it at this hour."

"Oh, are you going down?" asked the invalid with frank disappointment.

"I can sit on this," she said, perching herself on the signal-locker. "Or we'll send Ernie to find your chair and bring it here. He knows all the quartermaster's hiding places—don't you Ernie?"

"Rather," said the small boy proudly. "What's it like, and what's the name?" he asked in business-like tones.

"Canvas—McCalmont," said their new friend, and Ernie darted away in search of the chair.

"What a queer little fellow!" said Reggie, looking after him. "I beg your pardon though," he continued, turning to Gilda, "is he a relation?"

"No," she said, meeting his glance, "I have no relations on board. I am travelling alone."

"I am afraid you think me cheeky for asking," he said humbly. "You have been so kind that I forgot you never knew me till this morning. I only wanted to know whether he was to share the gratitude I am feeling to you! He tried to turn me out when he first came up, and told me I was probably a thief!"

Gilda laughed. "He is very fierce if people touch my things," she replied, "we have been great friends for three weeks, and he looks upon me as his personal property!"

"Lucky boy," said Reggie benignly, smiling at Mrs. Edmondson as if he had known her for three years.

"It is only a temporary arrangement," said Gilda, holding up a book to keep off the blinding reflection of sun and water which was making her grey eyes shine like dark diamonds, "but he will miss me when we part, I am afraid; nobody seems to have been at all kind to him before, and he is such a dear child!"

"Whom does he belong to?" asked Reggie, just to keep her talking.

"Oh, some horrid people who do nothing but scold and slap him, poor little chap! I had to make the Captain interfere once Here he comes!"

Ernie had found the chair and was dragging it towards them in the teeth of the wind which puffed out the canvas like a sail. Gilda went to his aid, and carefully read the name on the card sewn on its back. In a few moments she and Ernie were established

close to Captain McCalmont, the cigarettes and the bonbons were produced, and it looked as if the three were going to make a long, cosy ship-afternoon of it. Gilda steadily refused to play quoits till the cool hour after tea, and by the time that airy meal had been served to them on deck, Mrs. Edmondson had learnt nearly all there was to know about Reginald McCalmont. He was eight and twenty (honour bright!), had had what he called "an accident" in a scrimmage with the Dervishes, had been invalided home, advised to take six months' leave and sea journeys, so had come out to pay a visit to his uncle who was Minister at Rio—had ridden through a swamp and got yellow fever, so thought it about time to be moving as soon as he could stand—would be perfectly well in two days now!

"But the Straits!" exclaimed Gilda. "The cold will kill you. How could they let you come this way after such an illness?"

"Oh, I shall be all right," he laughed; "do me a lot of good, I expect. You see I want to see the West Coast, work up to 'Frisco, and then home by Japan and India, and that stodgy old Suez Canal!" And he made a wry face.

"You must come and see us on the way, then," said Gilda.

"I should like to see you all the way," he replied with much seriousness, "but I suppose that would be asking too much. Please don't mind my being an awful idiot, just for to-day! It is so incredibly pleasant to feel better that I am afraid I may get quite light-headed over it!"

"Was you very bad?" inquired Ernie sympathetically. He used the past tense as our great-grandmothers generally did.

"Oh no, nothing to speak of," said Reggie, who began to feel ashamed of keeping the conversation fixed on himself. Then he said to Gilda, "Do you really mean it, Mrs. Edmondson? I should like awfully to come if you will tell me how to get there."

"It is something of a scramble," she answered. "Twenty miles in a carriage from Santiago, and then *such* a climb at the end. I have not been there for a great many years. They call it the Hacienda de los Demonios—the demon farm! A nice name, isn't it!"

"I suppose it's got ghosts," suggested Ernie, awestruck.

"Lots, I dare say!" said Gilda, looking out to sea.

"Do you stay there alone?" Captain McCalmont asked bluntly.

"No," she replied; "my brother lives there. I will tell you how to reach us the day before we land. You are not strong enough to take it in now!"

She had not told so much about herself to any one on board, and she had only known Captain McCalmont since—lunch time!

II

THE strings of etiquette become very much loosened at sea, and both friendships and enmities reach their growth faster than they ever do on land. Nobody was in the least surprised to see that the exclusive Mrs. Edmondson had taken Captain McCalmont into her friendship. She had shown him much kindness on that first dizzy morning, so it was no wonder that his chair was always close to hers against the smoking-room wall; no wonder that the trio became inseparable, talking, laughing, or keeping silence in the same corner of the deck from breakfast till bedtime. Ernie was at first inclined to be jealous of the new comer, but was entirely won over to his side by the present of a magnificent knife which Reggie had used faithfully for years, and by finding that Mrs. Edmondson did not intend to neglect him at all, but on the contrary seemed more ready for larks and laughter than she had been before.

Three clear days were given them after leaving Monte Video, for which the Captain was properly thankful. He slept through most of them in preparation for what was coming.

They were beginning to feel the cold rather sharply, coming as it did after the blaze of the tropics. Poor Reggie McCalmont shivered ominously, and the trio abandoned the deck for a sunny corner of the companion divan, where Reggie was rolled up in Mrs. Edmondson's fur rug with a hot bottle to his feet. He had never been made so much of in his life, and enjoyed it hugely—even exaggerating his woes a little for fear that his charming self-constituted nurse and doctor might lose interest in him. Ernie generally managed to snuggle in under the rug too, for, much to Gilda's indignation,

his tender parents had brought no warm clothes for the poor little man, and he was going to face the frozen Straits in his threadbare serge nickers and darned blue jersey.

"I can't understand those people," she said indignantly to Reggie one night after Ernie had been sent to bed. "They never ought to have had any children! Fancy that poor little chap having no clothes for the Straits! I have a great mind to cut up my plaid to make him an overcoat! Only it is such an absurd pattern!"

"You seem to know a lot about children, as you do about everything," Reggie remarked, looking at her admiringly. Then his face lighted up. "I know what we'll do," he went on; "I have an overcoat I don't in the least want—got too stout for it, you see."

Gilda pointed to his long thin fingers and laughed.

"Well, it's true," he said, "I can be lots thinner than this when I try! If you could get the stewardess to cut it down for him, now——"

"What a good idea!" said Gilda. "Are you sure you won't need it? How furious his parents will be!"

"We must pretend it belongs to—oh, my younger brother," said Reggie; "it will be all right, you'll see!"

"What a pace we are going!" said Gilda, rising and peering out into the night.

"Bang through the fog too," answered he, coming to her side; "frightful shindy the siren makes, doesn't it?"

"Awful!" said Gilda. "Ernie and I used to sound it for fun till one night the Captain caught us. I feel as if the fogs had come to avenge the insult. I wish I had not done it!"

"How superstitious you are," he said, looking down on her with a smile. "The fog lies here nine months of the year. Remember it is winter, though we call it May."

"I know," she said, "that is one of the great drawbacks of this underworld. Fancy ice and sleet in July and August!"

"Are you going to stop long in Chile?" Reggie ventured to ask.

"Till the business is done—or till I am tired of it," she said. "Things have been going badly with my land, and I came out to look into it."

Reggie was rather overawed. He thought that she could not be much over twenty—and she spoke as seriously as an old business man. Again the question of Mr. Edmondson presented itself to his mind, and he would have given much to know who and where he was. He must be a brute to let Mrs. Edmondson go wandering off to South America alone. Probably some selfish old creature enjoying himself at home. The idea of Mr. Edmondson's extreme age was alluring, and when it had once presented itself, Reggie soon decided that the absent husband of this charming woman was certainly seventy or seventy-five, perhaps even eighty. That accounted for her being weary of his society and turning to the Demon Farm for distraction.

The fog lay thick and white on the cold grey water, which they could only see in a veiled circle round them. After two days the lead was lowered every five minutes, since they were approaching the far-reaching sandbanks of Cape Virjenes. Mrs. Edmondson and the stewardess had produced a very comfortable garment for Ernie out of Reggie's overcoat, and the grateful little boy had become the devoted slave of the fair-haired warrior. Gilda pretended that she was desperately jealous, which caused Ernie the most thrilling happiness. They three lived as if the ship had been built for them, and people quite gave up trying to interfere with them. So the futile but pleasant existence went on, in spite of fogs and sandbanks; after all, that was the officers' business, not theirs.

On the fifth day the fog suddenly lifted, and the great peak of Cape Virjenes towered above them, just where it should have been. They were well inside the Straits now, and had not seen sun or star for nearly a week, so the captain came down to dinner that night to be congratulated on his beautiful seamanship. He looked quite gaunt and grey, poor soul, and said he thought he never should be warm again. But he was beaming, all the same, and promised Mrs. Edmondson a full moon for the night, which would see them through the narrowest and most interesting part of the channel. Gilda had seen it once, but only as a child, and she announced her intention of sitting up, so as to miss none of the scenery.

"You had better stay inside the smoking-

room, then," said the captain, "and have the fire kept up. It is going to be colder than anything we have had yet."

"That is saying a good deal," she replied. They were all rolled up in furs, as it was.

"May I sit up too, Mrs. Edmondson?" asked Reggie. "I don't like the idea of your being upstairs all alone."

"Don't you, really?" she answered, with a gleam of fun in her eyes.

"No," he said, "it makes me miserable to think of wasted opportunities." And he looked straight into the grey eyes.

"It is wonderful scenery," she assented; "they say there is nothing like it in the world."

"There's nothing like *you* in the world," sighed poor Reggie, as he went in search of her hat. "Oh, Mr. Edmondson, how I wish you were here, and that we could drop you overboard to-night!"

Some hours later, he and Gilda were making themselves delightfully comfortable in the smoking-room. The lights had been turned off, but the fire was burning cheerily in the little stove, and the promised moon was shining bravely through the square windows. Gilda, kneeling on the divan, her face pressed to the glass, cried out in delight at the strange beauty of peak and glacier, narrow gorge and shining lake, all white, ice-bound, silent, except for the swirling water which broke away from the bows in silver foam.

Even Reggie McCalmont held his breath as they passed so close between walls of rock that it seemed as if they might touch them with their hands. Gilda was speechless with excitement. Again and again it seemed as if they had reached a spot from which there was no possible exit—a wall of peaks before and behind hiding every vestige of the passage by which they had entered, or the one by which they must pass out. Then, with a quiver here and a twist there, a slow pull and a quick turn, the hands that guided their huge ark seemed to show her the road and lift her over the obstacles as a good rider lifts his hunter over a fence; and, while those two were still wondering how it was going to be done, lo! they were riding at ease in wide waters, and the narrow defile seemed to have floated away into the background. Few people realise what science and patience, what eyes and nerves it takes to steer an enormous liner through the frozen teeth of the Straits of Magellan. Destruction is seldom more than a few yards away on either hand, and pointed rocks suddenly spring up where the charts promise twenty fathoms of water, so that, in spite of all the efforts of the finest navigators in the world, the passage is marked with the wrecks of great steamers.

"Look there!" said Gilda, pointing to a black hulk on the shore of a little bay, less rugged than any they had passed yet.

"That is the wreck of the *Cordillera*," Reggie replied. "She looks grim, doesn't she?"

They had come out on deck, and were walking up and down in little sharp turns. The air was still, but intensely cold. The ship seemed empty but for themselves and the panting engines below. The officers on the bridge were hidden from them by thick barricades of canvas, from behind which they peered over into the night, and tried not to freeze to death. The captain was an abstainer—at sea—and allowed nothing but coffee on the bridge.

"Whisky has wrecked more blooming vessels than ever the weather did," he was heard to say to one of his officers. "What do you want fog in your brains for? Ain't satisfied with what you've got outside, I suppose!"

But the soberest and most experienced commander can have no control over the freaks of volcanic beds at the bottom of the sea. Just as Gilda and her friend were thinking of getting back to the smoking-room fire, the steamer gave a heavy lurch, and then brought up against something with a searching shock which set her quivering from stem to stern, and threw the man and woman back against the smoking-room wall.

"There goes my bonus!" said poor Captain Kayes on the bridge, and he rang violently to reverse the engines. A tearing sound accompanied the movement, and then came stillness, quickly broken by screams and hurrying footsteps on the stairs.

"What has happened?" cried some one, seizing Reggie's arm frantically. It was the Falkland Islands man in sleeping clothes and an overcoat. He was followed by Miss Twemlow (who had rushed from her berth wrapped in a blanket), and a crowd of heads appeared in the saloon stairway.

"Nothing at all," said the first officer, passing them. "Please go back to bed. A stoker dropped some coal."

"There can't be much danger so close to land," observed Miss Twemlow, shivering.

Then a small figure, half dressed, rushed towards Mrs. Edmondson, and flung itself into her arms. It was poor little Ernie.

"Oh, oh," he wailed, "I am so frightened. Father and mother are saying their prayers. I won't be drowned, I won't!"

"No fear, Ernie," said Gilda, rather shakily. "Come to the fire. Captain McCalmont," she added, turning to him, "go in at once. You will be having fever again."

"Were you frightened?" he asked when they three were down on their knees before the little stove.

"I am frightened," she answered, with a nervous laugh. "That rock has made a hole in her bottom. Don't you hear them hammering?"

"They often have to hammer something at this hour," said Reggie, who did not know how far her courage could be counted on. "It generally wakes me up."

"Nonsense!" said Gilda severely. "What is the use of telling foolish lies? I dare say we shall be all right soon, and if we are not we shall get off with a wetting, and I shall lose all my new frocks. Is that a subject for jest?"

"Oh, I didn't know," said Reggie. "If you are that sort it's all right, but you see I couldn't tell. I wasn't sure that you mightn't want to faint, or something."

"Not so close to land," she replied, mimicking Miss Twemlow's judicial accents. "Now, please go down below and find out what it is all about."

"You won't move?" said Reggie.

"Much too comfortable," she answered. "Besides—" She dropped her cheek on Ernie's touzled head and looked at the fire.

"Besides what?" asked Reggie, stooping down to try and see her face.

"I think I should like to see you again, if you really want to know," she replied. She was sitting on the floor so that the boy might toast his little cold toes; his seat was her lap, and her arms were round him, but as she spoke she looked up into Reggie's face, and her eyes were big with love and wonder, and her lips had a more tender smile than he had ever seen there before.

"Oh," he groaned for the second time as he went to obey her behest, "Mr. Edmondson, you villain, why aren't you here to be dropped overboard at once!"

He found one of the officers, and gathered the facts from him under a promise not to make them public property; there would be a screaming panic at once if they became known, for the damage was of a somewhat serious nature, several feet of the ship's side having been torn and injured by the rock—"a —— rock where the —— charts mark twenty fathoms of water," growled the irate sailor. But the commander hoped that it would only cause a few hours' delay, and not oblige him to put back into the harbour of Punta Arenas, as he had at first feared.

So Reggie returned to tell Mrs. Edmondson that there was really very little the matter, and that that little would be put right in a short time.

"Then what is the hammering about?" she asked doubtfully.

"Oh, well, that is the 'putting it right,'" he said. "You really must not be the least troubled. Why won't you go down now and go to bed? I'll take this boy to my cabin if you like."

Ernie had gone to sleep, and the conversation was carried on in a whisper over his head.

"You are sure you are not—deceiving me?" she asked, looking up into his face. "I couldn't possibly risk being saved at the last moment dressed in a blanket, like Miss Twemlow!"

"You could not look anything but charming, even in a blanket," he replied with much conviction. "But why should you accuse me of intending to deceive you? Do you ever do that sort of thing yourself?"

Instead of the indignant denial that he had expected a deep flush of colour dyed Gilda's cheeks. Her eyes, which had been turned questioningly up to him, suddenly fell, and she bent her head that he might not see her face.

Captain McCalmont could not believe the evidence of his own senses. But there was no mistaking the guilty consciousness which had shown itself so clearly. A sharp pang of pain went through the young man's heart, and a flash of unwelcome light seemed to

dispel the little cloud of romance which had hung round this pretty, inexplicable Gilda Edmondson. She was probably some nameless adventuress; the surly husband whom Reggie had been so fervently wishing at the bottom of the sea did not exist. But she could not be quite hardened yet—the ready blush testified to that. Well, here was one more illusion to be added to the pile of which a man boasts irrepressibly till he is thirty or so—and never mentions afterwards.

He felt cold and angry and very sore. He would not look in Gilda's face as he stooped and lifted the sleeping boy from her arms. Ernie was small for his age and very thin, so that he was not much of a burden, but Reggie seemed quite absorbed in him, and would not allow himself to feel the slightest pleasure in the touch of Gilda's hand as she stood up beside him and wrapped her rug round the child's limbs. He turned from her without a word and went downstairs, never looking back to see if his companion were following him. She gazed after him amazed; the flush disappeared, and her face became pale and troubled. Then she followed meekly, and turned into her own cabin without saying good-night.

All night the ominous hammerings in the hold continued. Sleep was impossible, and the cold seemed to make itself more felt now, with the ship at anchor in the freezing water, than when she was ploughing through it. Gilda had a very bad night, and having at last fallen asleep in the grey dawn, woke towards eleven o'clock to find the engines working, the water rushing past her porthole and the *Corotaxi* under weigh again, bearing, though her passengers knew it not, the signs of an ugly blow just below water mark.

Mrs. Edmondson was an enthusiastic person, always eager to see everything, so she jumped up and dressed in a hurry, sure that she would be told when she got on deck that the few hours of sleep had cost her the most beautiful part of the journey. No scenery is ever so fine as that which some one else has missed. She was in a hurry, too, on account of another reason, about which she could not stop to think, but she confessed to herself that it would be pleasant to meet Captain McCalmont and be assured that nothing was wrong, that they were still the best of friends.

The sun had come out at last, and met her as she emerged from the companion way on the deck. She paused for a moment to glance round, looking quite charming in her beaver cap, with the furred collar of her jacket rising high under her soft chin. The sun was dancing in her eyes and on her hair, and there was a touch of pink on her cheeks. But there was no one to see her. The deck seemed deserted on this, the windy side, so Gilda came out and began to skate along the smooth planks in a little mazurka step all by herself. The wind helped her, and then played tricks with her serge skirt and its red silk linings, just to keep it out of the way of her swift and slender feet.

Suddenly, at the end of the deck, she cannoned against some one walking quickly round from the other side. It was Reggie McCalmont, and her dancing ceased.

"Good morning," she said in her sweet, high voice. "Is not the weather glorious?"

She had decided to overlook his odd behaviour of last night, and to take it for granted that it had been an accident. But, alas! it was no accident. Reggie answered coldly:

"Good morning—yes, very fine," and then passed on his way without having looked her in the face.

Let not poor Reggie be misunderstood. He was no prig. Had the "nameless adventuress" been clearly ticketed as such, he would probably have made friends with her, for he was the most good-natured of men, and always ready to talk to a pretty woman, named or otherwise. But for two weeks he had believed Gilda to be everything that was most candid and correct He had talked to her for ten hours a day on an average, and every look and tone had confirmed and harmonised with that view. He had believed her to be out of his reach indeed, and so had doubtless done wrong in allowing her to take possession of his imagination, in allowing himself to wish the unattractive, elderly, absent Edmondson a hundred fathoms under water. This absolute belief in her sweet womanhood was such a great part of her charm that when he found, as he imagined, that she had something to hide, something to blush for, he also imagined

"He kissed her ceremoniously on both cheeks"

that she would hardly look beautiful in his eyes any more. He wished that they need not meet again, and seriously thought of landing at the first port they should call at after they got out of the Straits.

But when he met Mrs. Edmondson on deck in the sparkling sunshine, he saw that he had been mistaken as to how she would look to him after his discovery; with a great effort he passed her by, and then suddenly heard her calling his name.

"Captain McCalmont," said Gilda, "please come here."

She was trembling with anger, but thought that she could control herself enough to speak to him quietly. He came and stood before her, and began to feel a little ashamed of himself.

"If we are to quarrel," she said with flashing eyes, "it might add to the amusement if we knew what it was about."

"I don't want to quarrel," said Reggie in rather a husky voice, still refusing to meet her glance. He could not tell her what he thought, so why have an aimless scene?

"Then who is making you?" she asked.

"You," he said, taking a sudden resolve. "Why won't you tell me something about yourself? What are you doing here? Why are you—so afraid—of—what?"

He was only standing a pace or two away, and as he spoke he looked into her eyes. She met his glance fearlessly, but when she saw the honest question there, the traitor flush rose to her cheeks and set them burning. Tears of anger or emotion came to cloud her eyes, but she would not quail before him this time, and he, gazing, tried to see her ugly secret in their depths.

"It is difficult to become confidential when a pistol is levelled at one's head," she said. "I am afraid you will have to tell me what part of my history you are so anxious to hear. It has been a singularly uneventful one, so far."

"Then I will ask you," he said bluntly, "please forgive me if I am brutal. Where—is—Edmondson?"

"Dear me!" she remarked, raising her eyebrows, "is that what all this fuss is about? In Valparaiso, I hope, waiting to take me up to the Hacienda."

"You are going to meet him?" asked Reggie in mixed joy and vexation.

"Yes, if I can find him," she replied. "I have not seen him since I was ten years old, so we shall probably not recognise each other."

"Good heavens!" cried Reggie; "can such things happen? Married at ten years old?"

"You caught a chill last night, and I think you are a bit light-headed to-day," said Gilda in soothing tones—if he were ill he could be forgiven everything; then she went on, "We were talking about my brother, Carlos Edmondson, who lives in Chile."

"But—no," replied the bewildered Reggie. "I mean, where—is your husband?"

"How should I know?" she asked in quick surprise. Then his meaning dawned on her, and she sat down on the bench and laughed somewhat hysterically.

"Oh dear, I understand," she said, between ripples of merriment. "You thought I was married!"

"I can't see the joke," said Reggie dismally. "Why do you call yourself 'Mrs.' if you don't mean that—that you want people to take you for a married woman?"

Gilda did not laugh any more. "I see I shall have to tell you all about it," she said. "I am sorry I did not tell you before."

"So am I," said the young man. "It is very good of you. You see I—" and he stopped.

"Come away from here," she said; "we cannot talk quietly so near the stairs."

She led him away forward, over two intervening bridges and piles of ropes and chains, till they were all alone, leaning over the prow of the vessel, out of hearing of the screw, and listening only to the clear swish of the water as it cut away in foam from the bows.

"Now," said Gilda, "you want me to tell you about myself, but there is very little to tell. Where shall I begin?"

"At the beginning, please," he answered. He already felt much happier.

"Well, I will make it as short as I can, and you must be very nice and grateful, for I never talk about myself, it bores me. I am a Chilean girl—my father was English of course, but I was born in Santiago, so I am Chilean—*pura sangre!*"

"Rubbish," said Reggie, "you are as English as I am—and then?"

"Oh, well, I suppose I cut my teeth, and learned to read and write, and then they

sent me to school in England; and really, I think, that's all!"

"Please—a little more," pressed Reggie.

"I had a great misfortune," she said in a changed voice. "My father and mother died, and left us a big property—to my brother and me. There was a clever Intendente—a bailiff you would call him—who managed things for my father, and he too died—fell over a precipice as he was riding over the passes from the Argentine with my brother, and they never found his body. Then my brother got bad lungs and had to go and live at San Salvador de Bogotà for four or five years, and meantime a new bailiff came in, and I suppose things did not go well, there being no master on the place. But Carlos has been living there now for some years. He is many years older than I, and he and an uncle in England were trustees for my share. But I never liked my uncle, and when I came of age I was not satisfied with the accounts they sent me. Everything seemed muddled, somehow, and I made up my mind to come and look into it."

"Thank you very much," said Captain McCalmont, "and since you have been so good, I hope you will tell me two things more. Why are you Mrs. Edmondson, and—please don't be angry—why did you get so red last night when I stupidly asked you if you ever deceived people?"

Gilda looked away, and the "red" seemed about to return. Then she faced round and spoke with some irritation.

"It was perfectly idiotic of me, I know," she cried; "but—I was all alone, and I should have had to get a chaperon or be under the captain's care or something—people so soon find out what they call an heiress, and I could not be bothered with it all; so I put 'Mrs.' on my chair and boxes, just to be left alone. The captain knows, but nobody else does. And then when you said that about deceiving, I suddenly felt that I was a fraud, and that you would never be friends with me again if you knew, and I was ashamed of the silly trick! There—that really is all! Don't tell, please!"

But Reggie was silent, his face sunk in his hands as he leaned on the taffrail.

"I am sorry," Gilda repeated, touching his arm lightly. "I don't ever mean to be so stupid again!"

He turned and caught at her hand, and kissed it, and would not let it go till she pulled it away fiercely.

"Who scolded somebody about telling foolish lies last night!" he said, looking into her face with eyes at once tender and amused; but his mouth trembled as he spoke.

"I really didn't mean to tell—lies," said Gilda humbly.

"Oh, you darling thing!" he cried suddenly; "it seems too good to be true! Oh, oh—to think—it's all right!"

Then he caught her to him in the triumphant happiness of this revulsion of feeling, and she could not speak for a moment because her lover kissed her sweet lips dumb. At last she looked up, and he gazed down into her dewy eyes and rose-flushed face, as on a wonderful new flower which had suddenly bloomed on his breast.

"You seem to take a great deal for granted," she whispered tremulously.

III

THE *Corotaxi* came labouring out of the Straits, a knot or two slower than before, but merely on account of the strong winds and currents which race so madly up and down that inhospitable coast. To two of the passengers it had now become a matter of regret that the voyage was not to last for another month. Reggie and Gilda were so much occupied with one another—to the stern disapproval of Miss Twemlow and her kind—that Ernie began to long eagerly for the moment of landing in Valparaiso. Gilda had promised to take him up to the Hacienda with her while his parents were settling down in Valparaiso, and they had gladly consented to the arrangement, thankful to have the child off their hands for a while. Ernie had listened carefully to the conversation of his two friends, and had not heard his goddess invite Reggie to come, so he thought that he should have her all to himself.

Reggie and Gilda were just at the stage when each was taking possession, for life, of the other's past. There seemed such an amazing amount to tell, now that their future was to be shared; each suddenly realised that life had been full of thrilling interest since the other cared to hear about

it, and the little incidents of every day became landmarks to be remembered together, landmarks on the happiest of all paths, the path where their feet had met.

From what Gilda had told him of her brother and her brother's management of her affairs, Reggie came to the conclusion that it was quite time some man friend should stand by her side and see that she had what was hers. Indeed, for Reggie as for her small boy friend, everything ended at the Hacienda; California, Japan, India, all of which he had been so keen to see, were suddenly reduced to geograpical expressions of no importance. They might become interesting again if Gilda would travel home with him that way: but Gilda, who had only her pleasant recollections of life in Chile, said that she meant to stay there for some years at least, now that she had got so far, and—why couldn't Reggie stay too?

He was a little frightened at first, lest he should never be able to make her understand what Europe and the service meant to him—the soldier and the Englishman; this grey-eyed girl, who was to be his wife, was something of the wilful woman who must have her way, but he knew now that her heart was wholly his, and that would lead her right in the end.

"You look quite grown up now that your hair has begun to grow again," she said to him one morning, as they finally turned out of the Straits. "Do you know when you first came on board, I thought you were about eighteen!"

"Twenty-eight," said Reggie. "You were awfully good to me. I must have been a dreadful object."

"I thought you were very ungrateful," she answered. "Do you remember when I brought you a glass of wine, and you said it was 'fearful muck'—what a word to use!"

"Grocer's port!" he retorted, making a wry face. "I don't think the word was strong enough. Oh, I say, what a wonderful sight!"

Gilda turned, and saw a wonder indeed. The last peak of the islands rose high and alone, a pyramid of pure snow, out of the deep blue of the sea. Its summit was lost in a perfect globe of seven-tinted radiance, the rarely seen rainbow cloud, round as the world, brilliant as a planet, its jewel hues melting from topaz to ruby, emerald to amethyst, sapphire to pearl. It hung there, the complete rainbow, like a promise fulfilled.

"What is it? What does it mean?" asked Ernie Wilson, slipping his thin arm through Gilda's strong one, and speaking in an awe-struck tone.

"Everything that's good, Ernie, for all three of us," she replied. "Holidays and ponies for you, and dear old Chile and the Hacienda for me."

"And what for him?" asked Ernie, bobbing his head forward, and looking at Reggie, who stood very near on Gilda's other side.

Neither of his friends answered for a moment, but Reggie's hand found Gilda's, and drew it out of her brown muff, and then his two hands clasped over it as over the most precious jewel in the world.

"I shall be the richest of the lot, Ernie," he said. "This for me."

The little gloved fingers were raised to his lips very reverently, and Gilda realised the dear truth and tenderness which would be hers for ever; and, being at heart a worshipper, as every sweet woman is, felt the strongest impulse to fall down and kiss his feet, and say her prayers to him.

That being unusual, she held his hand very tight, and kissed Ernie's rough head, because he had made the happy moment.

And so, day by day, they crept from the frozen regions of the south towards somewhat greener country and more hospitable coasts, and at last reached Valparaiso, the bare, ugly port town, stretching its streets of glaring houses far out on the land reclaimed from the sea. Behind it, in a hot red wall, without a tree or a blade of grass, rose the inevitable Cordillera, which seems always to be trying how close it can push Chile to the ocean's brink without quite sending it over.

Reggie was very much disappointed, and could not understand Gilda's enthusiasm. Chile has some magic hold on those who were born on its soil, which no foreigner can ever share. For the most part a bleak and savage country, choked in dust or whelmed in mud, the Chilean returns to it from the fairest lands of earth with a loyal eagerness inexplicable to his European fellow traveller, who, after passing the little zone of green country round Valdivia, beholds with dis-

may the naked hideousness of the place which the Spanish discoverers christened the Vale of Paradise. Fully have they and their descendants justified the truth of the proverb, "No grass ever grows where the Spaniard has trod."

Gilda Edmondson became much excited as the *Corotaxi* steamed into port. Her brother Carlos was the only near relation she had in the world, and, though she had been forced in some measure to doubt his business capacities, yet her heart was warm towards him, and the memory she had carried away with her when she left him eleven years ago, was that of a tall handsome young man, with dark eyes and kind ways. Of course she was glad to think that in an hour or two she would see him again, and of course she was also slightly nervous as to what he would think of her.

She had chosen her frock that day with special care. It was a pale grey cloth, which suited her admirably, Reggie thought. He had never seen her look so pretty as when she came and stood beside him, gazing eagerly at the big cemetery on the hill, which is Valparaiso's first greeting to the traveller. She leant far over to see all that she could ahead of the steamer; her cheeks were pale with excitement, and her eyes moist with happy emotion. Reggie felt a little inclined to be jealous of Chile and the brother —for Gilda was really taking very little notice of him this morning.

Poor girl! She was destined to feel something of a shock when the meeting with her brother at last took place. Many people had already left the ship when he came off from shore, and Gilda, in a fever of excitement, was moving restlessly from one side of the deck to the other, Reggie following her, and trying to keep her spirits up, for the delay was trying her terribly. Ernie Wilson had been induced to accompany his parents on shore by Gilda's promise that she would herself call for him before she left Valparaiso. She and Reggie were watching the Wilsons' departure, and waving their hands to the unwilling Ernie, when a boat drew in to the ladder steps, and a tall man, carelessly dressed, sprang out, and made his way on deck, asking for Miss Edmondson. Gilda turned to find that the brother whom she remembered as young, attractive, charming, had become heavy and dull-looking, slouching in figure, and uncertain of glance, so changed that no single chord of memory seemed to thrill at the sight of him. He stopped a foot or two away, and said doubtfully:

"Gilda—is it you?"

Then she melted and came towards him with outstretched hands, crying, "Carlos—oh—I am so glad to see you!"

He kissed her ceremoniously on both cheeks, somewhat to Reggie's dissatisfaction, and then looked at her for an instant, as if against his will, before his eyes wandered on beyond her, to Reggie McCalmont, and the bulkhead, and the binnacle case.

"Well," he said with no pleasure in the tone, "I am glad to see you too, my dear—though, as you know, it is much against my wish that you should come, with the country in this unsettled state. If your boxes and things are all ready we had better be getting off."

"I was ready hours ago," said Gilda, deeply disappointed at the coldness of the tone. "I have been so frightened because you did not come before."

"I am sorry," he said curtly, "I only got down from Santiago an hour ago. We must stop in Valparaiso to-night, and can take the eight o'clock train up to-morrow morning."

"Will you introduce me to your brother, please?" said Reggie, suddenly stepping to Gilda's side, where he stood erect, his fingers tugging at his fair moustache, and his clear blue eyes searching the face of the man who was to be his brother-in-law.

"Carlito," said Gilda, "I must introduce you to Captain McCalmont" (here the two men bowed stiffly); "and—and we are engaged to be married."

Carlos Edmondson jumped as if he had been shot, and Reggie stood a shade closer to Gilda.

"Engaged?" Carlos faltered with his eyebrows meeting in an ominous frown, "I am surprised that you should have taken such a step without consulting your guardians, though of course," here he caught an expression of polite amazement on Reggie's thin features, "I am sure I shall be delighted to welcome Captain McCalmont into the family."

"Much obliged, I am sure," said Reggie, allowing himself a cold stare at Gilda's

brother, for whom he had at once conceived the most furious dislike.

Then Gilda spoke.

"I am afraid you forget that I have no guardians any longer, Carlito, having become a responsible person some months ago."

Carlito looked uncomfortable. "We had better be moving, I think," he said. "Doubtless we shall meet you at the hotel, Captain McCalmont; there is but that one," and he pointed to a large white building near the quay.

"Won't you come with us?" said Gilda in a low tone to Reggie, as the brother looked over the side to call his boatman.

"No, dear," said Reggie, "I had better leave you two to yourselves for a little. I will find you out at the hotel later, and satisfy your brother as to my solvency and respectability. And look here," he added, drawing her a little away and speaking low, "don't let yourself be bullied, please! Master Carlos looks a bit of a Tartar!"

"Oh, I shall be all right," she answered lightly, "he was always kind to me, you know, though he does not seem very glad to see me, does he?"

Reggie could not answer because Carlos turned and called to Gilda to "come on."

"Good-bye for the present," she said, loud enough for the other man to hear, "I shall expect you at four, don't be late."

Reggie helped to collect her traps and then saw her down the side. As she was carried away, sitting beside Edmondson in the dancing boat, she looked up to her lover with a bright smile and a little nod of her head, which he answered emphatically. Then, having let them get well away, he went downstairs to see to his own things, and decided in his own mind that although he had no reason for hating the real Mr. Edmondson as he had hated the imaginary one, yet—the bottom of the sea would certainly be the right place for him if he was anything like as bad as he looked!

Gilda tried to get up a little conversation as she and Carlos were rowed to shore, but he was silent and morose, and by the time they landed the girl had been made to feel that she had come at a wrong moment and need have no expectation of being treated as a welcome guest. Perhaps that was too much to hope, seeing the object for which she came, but having been a good deal petted in her adopted home in England, she was bitterly hurt to find herself received like an unwelcome interloper in Chile. She had far too much spirit to break down, and only punished her brother by appearing to be perfectly gay and at home, having escaped from tutelage once for all, and taking her stand on her clear rights as co-heir with him.

"You can explain all our misfortunes, as you call them by-and-by," she said, as he began a dismal litany about diseased cattle and flooded copper-mines, "I will not talk about sad things to-day. Tell me about the people at the Hacienda. Is my dear old Transito there still? I hope so!"

Transito had been Gilda's nurse and slave in the happy old baby days.

"Yes," said Carlos, won against his will by her bright way of taking things; "she has been arranging your rooms and is expecting you eagerly, I believe."

"There will be one person, at any rate, who will be glad to see me," said Gilda, with a glance of reproach at him.

"Oh, they will all be glad to see you, I dare say," Carlos replied in his curious dead voice. "A girl always makes more movement about the place. Transito married a Mestizo, a half Indian, who got eaten by a puma. She has grown enormous, and has an idiot son—at least, so she says. I believe he acts imbecility to escape being made to work. Here we are."

The boat drew in to the steps of the quay, and the brother and sister walked up the steep white street, followed by a little army of ragged porters carrying her many possessions.

An hour later she was seated on the red sofa of the hotel sitting-room, whose walls were hung with obsolete French prints—portraits of beauties who would be called frights now. The blinds were closed to keep out the afternoon sun, and Carlos was stretched in a shaky armchair, smoking a fearfully rank cigar. Gilda was pretending to look at the pictures in an old hotel guide, but her fingers shook a little. The day had been full of emotions; she missed the long roll of the *Corotaxi*, and felt dizzy and uncomfortable on terra firma. Carlos had lighted that cigar without asking her leave, and, besides, she knew that a scene was coming.

"And now, my dear sister," Carlos began in a fatherly, judicial manner, "who is this man to whom, as you tell me, you have got engaged?"

The tone was almost insulting, and Gilda's fingers stopped trembling. She sat up and closed the book with ominous decision, and crossed her arms on the table.

"I thought I introduced my *fiancé* to you on the ship," she said, trying to be dignified. "His name is Captain McCalmont."

She could not bring herself to say the dear intimate "Reggie" to those unsympathetic ears.

"What do you know about him?" Carlos took his long cigar out of his mouth and turned his sullen face towards her as he spoke.

"Three things that I shall never know about you!" cried Gilda, with flashing eyes. She had forgotten all about her dignity.

"Dear me," said Carlos, beginning to smoke again; "I shall be interested to hear which they are."

"He is the truest man in the world, he has the kindest heart, and—and he does me the honour to say that he cares for me."

"Ah," said Carlos, "then of course it is only left for me to congratulate you on having turned your time at sea to such good account. I suppose you have found out about his family and his fortune?"

"Why shouldn't he begin by finding out about yours?" she retorted, leaning across the table and looking straight at him. It was a shot fired at random, but Carlos Edmondson fell back as if he had been struck between the eyes. His face took an earthy tint, his jaw dropped, and a dark red spot came out on his forehead. Gilda was appalled at the effect of her own words, which had only been flung out to turn him from asking about Reggie's affairs, of which she knew, and, as she said to herself, needed to know, nothing. But she was quick to take advantage of the situation.

"As you know very well, Carlos," she said, still looking at him, "I came out here to ask questions and not to answer them. Captain McCalmont will, of course, be ready to assist me in arranging our little affairs, but I hope—I really hope that we shall not be obliged to call in his help."

Carlos had recovered himself, and rose, rather unsteadily, leaning on the table.

"You seem very fierce and independent, my little sister," he said, trying to smile, "but I suppose that is the effect of your English training. I will leave you now, as you will be wanting to unpack your things"

Gilda did not reply, and he left the room.

IV

WHEN Gilda found herself alone she did not set about unpacking her things; on the contrary she sat still, gazing across the shadowed room to where the excluded sunshine beat in jealous stripes on the venetian blinds. Although as Carlos had said, she was at times fiercely independent, the prospect of a series of quarrels and disputes had no attraction for her, and she saw well enough that it would cost her many of these to oblige him either to give up his hold on her share of the estate or to let her frankly divide with him the administration of the whole. His last proposal, made by letter some months ago, had been to the effect that he would continue to pay her a moderate allowance out of the estate and invest whatever was over as her share of profits in improved machinery and so forth—which would remain her property, of course. This meant that Gilda should sow and Carlos should reap, as was clearly pointed out to her by the lawyer whom she had taken the trouble to consult. He had advised the taking of legal measures and told her that she could now insist on a public sale and division of the property, which would make her independent of her brother; but Gilda was sure that her appearance at the Hacienda and a few conversations with Carlos would set everything right, without any legal measures at all. She had consented rather unwillingly to take a letter of introduction to an "Abogado" of high standing in Santiago, so as not to be quite friendless should the almost unknown brother prove intractable. She was thinking that he seemed much less easy to manage than she had hoped, when a sharp knock sounded on the door, and Reggie entered, closed it behind him, and without waiting to be asked, sat down

beside her on the sofa, and heaved a long sigh of relief.

"What is the matter?" said Gilda, laughing. The sight of him had sent all her forebodings out of the window.

"You heartless girl!" he said, putting his head down on the table beside her hand, "I haven't seen you since one o'clock and it is now a quarter to four, and you ask me what is the matter? I don't believe you have missed me a bit!"

"You are getting very exigent, sir!" said Gilda, "but I am glad you thought it long. I have been having a horrid time with Carlos."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Reggie, raising his head and looking terribly ferocious. "I think you had better let me deal with him. It isn't fitting that you should be troubled with odious scenes and quarrels."

"He did not exactly make a scene," said Gilda, "but he was very disagreeable and sneering about—oh, about our engagement, you know—and then——"

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Reggie, the hot blood of the aristocrat suddenly rushing to his temples. This Chilean cattle-dealer—sneering about him! Then he remembered that the cattle-dealer was Gilda's brother, and he put away his anger and asked quietly, "And then, dear? If I know all about it perhaps I can be of some good. What else did he talk about?"

"He wanted to ask questions—about you," she replied, "and when I said that perhaps you would prefer to begin by asking some about him he turned quite blue—and looked so odd. And then he went away. I am sure there are all sorts of things he does not want us to know."

"Did you tell him that I was coming to see you at the Hacienda?" asked Reggie, leaning back, his hand in hers.

"No, dear, I hardly had time," she said, "I will tell him this evening." She had really been a little timid about informing her unsympathetic brother of McCalmont's proposed visit. The old house was certainly as much hers as his, but after all he was the titular master of it at present.

"I shall tell him," cried Reggie, "that I invited myself. It's a bounderish thing to do, but I can't help what he will think of me. I am not going to let you run off into those wilds alone with him. I shall go up with you."

Gilda's face brightened.

"That will be charming," she said. "How good you are to me, Reggie! But I am afraid you will find it very rough—'casuela' with saffron, sodden beef and sour wine, are what I remember about the housekeeping! You will be sighing for the flesh pots of the *Corotaxi* again!"

"One eats too much at sea," said Reggie sagely. "Short rations will do one a lot of good, and—anyway, I am coming: and as I shall try to be amiable to Edmondson, I hope he will manage to tolerate me."

"You are a dear," said Gilda, "you know I am going to take Ernie for a few weeks, so it will just be the *Corotaxi* over again. Carlos ought to be only too thankful for such good company."

"I suppose he won't refuse me a bed?" said Reggie. "Is there any sort of an inn up there?"

"Inns—no, indeed," said Gilda, "it is quite, *quite* the end of the world. We have no neighbours except some Dominican monks, five miles off, the remnant of an untamed tribe of Araucanians, and the pumas!"

It was Reggie's turn to look pleased.

"I always wanted to shoot a puma," he said, "just to show all my maiden aunts what a cat can grow into if it is too much protected. They belong to the Pussy Benevolent Society. How they will amuse you when we go home!"

Reggie had been trying to make Gilda promise to go back with him—as Mrs. McCalmont this time—before his leave should be over, but she would give no promises at all as yet.

"Carlos will love you if you shoot a few pumas," she said. "Sometimes they clear the fowl-house out in a single night, so that there is not even one old hen to put in the casuela for breakfast. The Indians call them lions—their pale green eyes make them look so awful—but they are skulking, cowardly beasts, only worth shooting for their skin. That is lovely."

"It is getting much cooler," said Reggie; "let us hunt for Ernie Wilson and get a 'coche' as they call it, and I will take you two for a drive."

"Do," said Gilda, getting up; "I feel

quite choked in this tiny room. It takes one a long time to shrink after six weeks of sea and sky and deck-chairs."

"You don't look very enormous yet!" said he, looking up to her as she stood beside him. Then he drew her face down to his and smiled into her eyes.

"My Mrs. Edmondson," he said, and then she kissed him of her own accord.

Ernie was wild with joy at being reunited to his friends, and the three went rolling along in a decrepit landau behind two spirited little Chilean horses, whose driver alternately swore and prayed for them as they struggled up the long hills and dashed down the short ones. The little party laughed and chattered, and were quite as jolly as if no Carlos Edmondson had been waiting to greet them with glum disapproval when they returned. Ernie went upstairs holding Reggie's hand, and stopped him on the first landing.

"You was right, Reggie, and I was wrong," he said. "There is a 'Mr.,' and that cross black man's him."

"I expect he is what you once called me, Ernie," Reggie replied, and added under his breath, "a great big thief!"

Gilda diplomatised a little with Carlos by telling him first that Captain McCalmont was very much against her staying long in Chile, and that six weeks or two months would probably see her on the eastward route again; and when this pleasant stimulant had had time to work, and Carlos had become more genial under its influence, she broke to him the fact that both her big and small friend would accompany her to Santiago the next morning, and hence to the Hacienda, which could only be reached on the third day.

Carlos took the news quietly, and only said that he hoped she had told Captain McCalmont how very rough it was up in the hills. As he was much more polite to Reggie when they met at dinner that evening, she concluded that perhaps he had not meant to be disagreeable after all, and reproached herself for partially deceiving him. She had had no intention of leaving Chile so abruptly till she found it necessary to tell him so.

The journey to Santiago at that time was a very rough-and-tumble affair. The single line of rails ran in the most confiding manner along precipices, across chasms, through a large lake on the sketchiest of dykes, and finally meandered up a mile or two of unprotected streets before stopping in the heart of what was once a fine old Spanish town. Now, rent by earthquakes and plastered with French stucco, Santiago looks like a broken-down peasant woman trying to become a society beauty. A few pretentiously smart streets, a hundred wretched ones, the beautiful Alameda, a garden or two, the frowning stone Cathedral on the gorgeous Plaza, tramways, and a dry river-bed—these are what one sees if one has the courage to climb the citadel rock of Santa Lucia, laid out now as a public garden. From its summit the eye travels away beyond the little Antipodean Paris to the desolation of the plain, which begins under the town walls, and reaches far and far to the slow rising spurs of the enormous naked Cordillera which shuts it in on every side. Burning in summer, icy in winter, swept by dust storms or drowned in mud, bound to starve but for the supplies sent down from the semi-tropical districts—the continued existence of the Chilean capital is a triumph of civilisation over circumstances.

It was rather an incongruous party that Gilda had got together, and she felt no desire to linger in Santiago. She wanted to see the home whose cherished memory had brightened many a day in the long years since her father and mother had brought her down to the little steamer in Valparaiso, promising that three years (which seemed quite the same as eternity to her then) should see her return to them. Both were dead long before the three years had elapsed, and Carlos, supreme in her affairs, had, on the pretext of having no lady in the family to take care of her, sternly refused to let her return until his refusal was powerless to keep her away. He had been fond of the bright-eyed child in early days, but she would always have hampered him greatly, and in these last years would have been distinctly in his way.

They spent one day in Santiago, where Carlos passed long hours closeted with the director of a bank, an unjust judge, and a mining expert. He seemed to be in better spirits in the evening, and told Gilda to get to sleep in good time, since a very early start was necessary the next morning in order to avoid the heat.

It was early in December (corresponding in those latitudes to our month of June), and the summer morning was delightfully fresh and still at six o'clock, when the sleepy hotel waiter packed the party into the ramshackle ark on wheels which was to carry them (and Gilda's absurdly numerous boxes) up to the Hacienda. Carlos wanted to have the boxes left to follow on an ox cart, but she declined to be parted from them, and so another horse was added to the scratch team, chiefly harnessed with ropes and bits of wood which gave way at every rise in the road and had to be mended with string.

At last the dusty plain was left behind, and they began to creep up the outlying spurs of the Andes, but it was long past midday when a wide valley, high among the hills, opened out before them. A tiny river, still fairly full from winter rains and snows, wandered through it in sinuous curves, bordered with willow and poplar trees. The road followed these, passing here and there over a rough bridge or a mud dyke where the low fields were partially flooded. For there were fields, wide and green, stretching away on either hand and even trying to climb the skirts of the mountains, softer there than among the foot-hills. The meadows were full of white oxen, pastern deep in the thick clover, and here and there a beautiful little Alderney raised its head and gazed solemnly at the passing carriage. Near to the river grew quantities of bean plants just pushing forth their fragrant blossoms, and far away at the end of the valley, a peak of the Cordillera, still crowned with snow wreaths, rose against the sky. After the dust and glare of the road this emerald vale seemed like the garden of Paradise.

Gilda stood up in her place with parted lips, and eyes straining to catch the first glimpse of her old home.

"I see it," she cried, "there, among the trees! Oh, the dear old place!"

Had she been alone she would have wept hot tears for joy and remembrance, but she would not show such weakness before others, and sat down in her place pale and silent, with clasped hands. Carlos was looking away to some point on the hillside, and Ernie was beside the driver, so Reggie bent forward, took her hand close in his, and said in his kind low voice:

"My dear, it is perfectly lovely! I don't wonder that you wanted to see it again."

His sympathy dissolved the painful tension of unshared joy. She looked at him gratefully, and though her eyes were moist with unshed tears, the soft colour rose again in her cheeks, and she murmured:

"I think it is the seeing it with you here, you know. One's heart seems too full to live!"

As they drew nearer to the house, groups of bronze-coloured, dark-eyed labourers met them, and stood still to call out their welcome to the girl, whom many remembered as a child, running about the place in the old days. The women pushed their children towards her with bunches of geranium and acacia in their little hot hands, saying "En buena hora ha vuelto, Señorita! En mui buena hora!" And Gilda, smiling to one and another, patted the little heads held up to the carriage, and began to feel warm at heart, since some one at any rate was glad to see her return.

One thing struck Reggie very forcibly, and that was the prosperous appearance of the whole estate. There was nothing in these verdant fields and sleek cattle and well-fed labourers to suggest hard times such as Carlos had described to his sister. Reggie's home in England was in one of the great agricultural districts, and he knew good land and healthy beasts when he saw them. The Edmondsons' Hacienda appeared like a favoured oasis in the midst of this desert country.

Now they were driving through an avenue of acacias, and in a moment pulled up before a large low building, beyond whose open portals was the vista of a flowery courtyard, with many rooms opening into it. Gilda sprang out of the dusty carriage, and was immediately embraced and hugged, with cries of joy, by a stout Chilean woman, whose big gold earrings flashed in the sun, while tears of happiness ran down her brown cheeks. This was Transito, Gilda's nurse in early years, and now general housekeeper and ruler in the queer rambling establishment. Behind her was her son, a curious-looking boy with light eyes, and a frightened look on his otherwise Indian face.

Carlos at once disappeared into his own room, and Gilda was left to give orders to Transito about the housing of her two

visitors. Fortunately space was not wanting in the old home, and they were immediately installed in two rooms opening into the second courtyard, which ran away behind the first, flagged with stone, and shaded with sweet-smelling acacias. Beyond this again were the servants' quarters, kitchens, and storehouses, built round another square yard. All the rooms were on the ground floor, with a long continuous gallery of attics running above them. These were occasionally also used as storehouses, but had a bad reputation amongst the people on the place, who declared that they were the abode of various "animas," or wandering souls, whose proceedings some of the old Indians described with prosaic precision. No dwelling could have looked more sane and airy than the old Spanish house with its sunny spaces and tall windows, all opening into the courtyard for fear of robbers. The outside walls had only one or two openings, and these were strongly barred, giving the house a rather feudal and fortified aspect. Ernie Wilson was delighted with the prospect of freedom to run about wherever he liked, and profited so well by his opportunities that when a servant was sent to call every one to lunch, he had completely disappeared.

As he was sure to turn up when he was hungry, nobody was very anxious about him, but Gilda and Reggie thought that his presence would have eased the constraint of sitting opposite Carlos, who hardly spoke except to scold Transito and her underling about one thing or another. The violent aspect of the dishes (mostly highly coloured with saffron and Chilis), and the curious slipshod service, rendered with many smiles and confidential remarks, struck Reggie as queer in the extreme; but Gilda did not seem to mind, and asked Transito a dozen questions as the good soul ran in and out from her kitchen, wiped the plates with her voluminous apron, and insisted on filling all their glasses again and again with strong red wine of Chiloe.

At last, when a tremendous show of home-made sweets had been placed on the table, Ernie crept in, very shamefacedly, and sidled into his chair. He beamed when he found that Gilda, whose ideas of discipline were much relaxed to-day, meant to let him begin with the sweets and finish up with the meat—if he wanted it.

When the sun sank a little and a cool breeze swept down the valley, Gilda, tired with the journey and all the excitement of the day, brought a chair out into the garden on the shady side of the house, and found Reggie already established there in a hammock swung between two old trees which still marked the end of an abandoned path leading up from the fields. This had apparently once been the front of the house, as was shown by the stone steps and the outlines of a large bricked-up doorway in the wall. Some attic windows, heavily barred, looked out on this side.

Reggie dropped lightly from the hammock and set Gilda's chair down for her at the top of the steps. Geraniums grew high against the house, and deep grass and dock leaves made the spot cool and green. Gilda sank into her chair as if very tired and Reggie sat down on the step.

"How nicely your hair has grown!" she remarked, looking down at his curly head. "You don't look at all like a convict now."

"Don't hurt my feelings," said he, laughing; "your brother has snubbed me till a rough word would make me cry!"

"Oh, come," said Gilda, "I thought he was not at all disagreeable considering——"

"Considering that I am here under protest!" said Reggie. "You must give me a cigarette for that, Mrs. Edmondson!"

"Don't say that again," cried Gilda, flushing. "We agreed never to talk about that folly."

"Then please do not suggest that I looked like a convict," he answered. "I say, Gilda dear, what a queer place this is. I feel frightened."

The tone was quite serious, and Gilda leant forward to see his face. His eyes were fixed on the sheer mountain wall which rose to the right. As the sun passed off the valley, every break and scar in the rocks became clear in the quiet afternoon light.

"Reggie," she said, puzzled, "what on earth do you mean? I thought men never acknowledged that they could be frightened, anywhere—and here it is all so quiet and safe. What are you thinking of?"

"Everybody has been frightened some time or other," Reggie replied, "and it is not the fashion to tell fibs about it, as our

ancestors were always doing, I am sure. I have been horribly scared more than once, and was profoundly grateful for not being found out."

"I suppose that is true about our ancestors," said Gilda, with a sigh, for women are very conservative in their hero-worship and want all brave men built on one pattern.

"Yes," he went on, "I feel as if I were walking in the dark and were just going to get a fearful crack on my nose against something. I wish I knew where to feel for it."

"Look at that vulture," said the girl, pointing to a dark speck hanging over a point of the rock wall. "He has been there all day! I saw him when we arrived."

"Waiting for something to die up there," answered Reggie, "some strayed sheep with a broken leg most likely."

"This is all very gloomy," Gilda said impatiently. "There, the sun is quite off now —let us go for a walk."

As she and her lover strolled away under the acacias, Carlos Edmondson watched them from behind the bars of an upper window, and his face was not pleasant to see.

"Go on, you two," he growled between his teeth, "and get out of my way as soon as possible. You are not wanted here."

Then he turned back to some work from which the sound of their voices had roused him.

V

THE long attic with its dark corners and few windows, was evidently a favourite haunt of Mr. Edmondson's. A door at the farther end was barricaded with bars of wood nailed across its breadth, and the only other entrance was secured by a complicated English lock, the key of which hung on the master's watch-chain. Besides the bars, heavy outside shutters were provided for the windows, and the apartment immediately below was Carlos' own sleeping room, where he could hear the lightest footstep on the creaking floor of his treasure house. The bare dusty attic held many precious things over which the owner kept jealous watch. A safe in one corner was crammed with papers, silver, gold and jewellery, for Gilda's mother, like all Spanish women, spent a good deal of money on gems, and Carlos had seen no reason for sending them across the water to the absent sister.

But more precious to him than the contents of the safe were certain rough bits of rock and quartz laid out in rows on the table near the window. Most of these were marked with a date and a name. One bore this inscription: "Jan. 16. Pico Delgado, 150 feet N.E. of Red Pool;" another, "March—east rock, seven Aloes."

He stood beside the table now, taking up first one and then another, talking to himself as people will do who have lived long alone.

"No more doubt—no more doubt now," he murmured as he laid down a stone and began to walk up and down the room with his hands in his pockets, "the gold is there, the soil of the pool is thick with it; but where—where is the sealed mine, the pit guarded by dead Spaniards, as the Indian stories tell?"

He came back to the window, and looked gloomily up the valley, quiet and cool in the afternoon light.

Yes, the gold was the secret of his life. Five years before, wandering round a spot in the hills known as the Red Pool, he had noticed a vanishing gleam in the dry muddy sides left bare by the summer heat. Remembering strange stories told by the Indians about the place, he had carefully washed clot after clot of the baked mud, and had extracted a few grains of pure pale gold. His heart had stood still for joy when the yellow particles gleamed back to him from the bottom of the copper bowl, and from that day the lust for gold which had been the ruin of many a brave Caballero among his countrymen, fired his blood and gave him no rest till he found more. Secretly and stealthily he tried the soil between the pool and the hills, but in vain, for it yielded nothing. Then he put together a rough raft —for since the land was not his, he dared tell no one what he hoped—and with a long pole tipped with a kind of hod, brought up specimens of its bottom from one point after another, till he was satisfied that he had found an alluvial bed, which, though not rich, might be made to repay some labour bestowed on it. But one point, towards the southern end of the tarn, baffled all his attempts to fathom it, and seemed to sink away in a sort of volcanic shaft to the bowels

of the earth. This was, he told himself, the mouth of the spring which fed the small lake with sullen perseverance; in the coldest day of the bitter Andes winter, the ice hardly formed over that spot, and in the fiercest droughts of summer the sinister coloured water was fathomless there, although the northern shore was cracking in the sun. The Indians called the place the "Cup of Blood," and would go miles round over dangerous paths rather than pass it after sunset.

There was a certain space between the edge of the lake and the wall of sheer rock which closed it in on the south, and here, as has been said, Carlos found no trace of gold, but the case was different when he came to try the rock itself. Even within reach of the ground, he found two distinct veins of quartz containing traces of the precious metal, and then a serious question arose as to how he was to continue his investigations any further, since for a hundred feet from the ground the stone rose in a sheer burnt wall, which he had no means of scaling. So he tried it from the other side, and began a series of night expeditions, when in the clear starlight of the southern world he cut steps in the rock, and brought away hundreds of specimens which he crushed and washed in the old attic—all in vain. His first discoveries seemed to be the produce of the end of some lode, running low down through the hills, and only to be reached by mining operations involving great labour and expense. Still, he would not give it up, and sending for a number of scientific books, set himself steadily to study the ways and freaks of gold-producing districts. Then he went back to his precious rocks, and carefully marked the geological trend, which, starting from far below his feet, tossed the last streak of their volcanic ribbon high against the sky. Following this he had come on more than one old track among the hills, which from its leading to no pass or peak could only, at those inhospitable altitudes, be a miner's path to hoped-for gold.

Carlos now began to find traces of the gold itself, and became, through habit, a little less cautious than at the beginning of his explorations; but between anxiety and excitement, daily elations and disappointments, his temper did not improve. Transito found him hard to please, and got many a sharp word, which hurt the good soul bitterly. The bailiff was sent about his business when he came with his accounts, the labourers were kept waiting for their meagre wages, and Transito's son got a sound beating for hanging about the door one evening when Carlos started for the hills, with a pick on his shoulder, just at the time when all the people in the place were supposed to be gathered in the kitchen for their evening meal.

Poor Anton was not quite sane, but he was very far from being an idiot. Transito had married a half-caste Indian, and had further had the misfortune to see him killed by a puma (braver and perhaps hungrier than most of its kind) not long before the boy was born, and he came into the world with pale green eyes, like the puma's own, shining weirdly in his dark brown face, a coarse grey down outside his ill-shaped head and a troubled brain within it. Sometimes he was silent for weeks together, and pretended to hear nothing except the call to his meals. At other times he could answer reasonably enough, and always showed the most amazing cunning and perseverance in attaining his object whenever he thought it worth while to have one.

The people about the place called him the puma boy, and were most patient with his pranks and tempers, but the master was conscious of a growing horror of the ugly lad, whose pale eyes he would find fixed on him again and again, as if asking him questions. The beating was the outcome of weeks of irritation—and also of genuine fear lest this irresponsible being might take to watching him too closely, and some day make the nature of his occupations public. Anton did not scream or cry out, but turned and bit at his chastiser's hand with his white, pointed teeth; and since that day he would spit and hiss softly when Carlos passed him.

One moonlight night, when the master had ridden much further than usual into the hills (for his Chilean pony was a very goat at climbing), he was startled by seeing a figure glide behind a point of rock as he dismounted preparatory to tying his horse to a stump of aloes. In an instant he had darted round the point to discover the intruder, but found nothing among the tossed boulders and prickly scrub, although the moon shone so clearly that the hillside

was clear as day before his eyes. The incident impressed him disagreeably, for there was nothing to bring any human being into these solitudes—except the search for gold, and that he had no mind to share with any one. However, he went on his way, passed two or three hours with hammer and chisel, turning the light of a hooded lantern on the rocks as he worked, and then returned to the spot where he had left the pony.

At first he thought that he must have lost himself, as there was no trace of the animal to be seen. But on examination its hoof marks were quite visible in the sandy soil which had accumulated here in a slight depression of the path, and the next moment Carlos found his stick, which he had twisted in the reins, lying head down among the aloes. He cursed his own carelessness in not making the "lhaso" more secure, and then after a call and a whistle, which only produced startling echoes among the desolate hills, started on a long walk home.

What was his amazement, on reaching the Hacienda, to find his pony waiting patiently outside the stable door! The creature was still breathing hard and covered with lather, as if he had galloped for an hour.

All this was very disturbing to a quiet discoverer pursuing scientific researches in no man's land, and Carlos decided that the moment had come for him to take a decisive step.

It was a very decisive one indeed, for he raised a heavy mortgage on the Hacienda and invested it in several hundred square miles of bare rock in the Aconcagua district, much to the delight of the Government agent, who pocketed a large sum over the bargain, and piously thanked heaven that the world was full of solvent lunatics still.

The little matter of the mortgage had not been mentioned to Gilda, and Carlos was justly irritated when she refused to allow some two-thirds of her income to be appropriated to "farm improvements," which would have taken the peculiar shape of cradles, hydraulic washers, mercury and copper plates, all somewhat distantly connected with dairy work and cheese making, which were supposed to be the chief industries of the Hacienda de los Demonios.

It was an ugly name for a farm, and had been changed by Gilda's mother to that of San Miguel, but the people refused to adopt the new title. Carlos, after his curious experience on the mountain side, began to feel a little uncomfortable, and to wonder whether there were not some sort of bad luck attached to this scornful way of speaking of persons who were evidently powerful and might, perhaps, be found unforgiving.

The incident of the pony had already become dim in his mind when his peace was disturbed by another trifling event. The specimens on his table took to disappearing, one at a time, and returning a day or two later. The first that went was a stone containing visible gold, and important because it was the only sample he had found as yet from the higher peaks. He thought that he must have brushed it off, and searched every corner of his attic in vain, making fearful confusion among the utensils with which it was crowded. No; the stone was gone.

Two days later it met his eye as he entered the room; it was then standing on a neat pile of three others, and its white label was marked with a staring red cross. Carlos sat down beside the table trembling in every limb, and gazed at the uncanny little trophy with terror in his eyes. He was so sure that no one but he himself could enter the carefully locked room that he at once put down the freak to some sort of supernatural agency. He was not a good man, and had boasted for years of having no belief in anything beyond the visible world around him, but all his philosophy could not help him here. He was as frightened as a nervous child in the dark, and nothing would induce him to touch the weird fragment which seemed to be going and coming on its own account. There it stood for three days; and then it fell as he closed the door, and on going up to the table he felt the cold moisture of fear stand out again on his brow, because one of the three supporting stones was gone.

He rubbed his eyes, moved backwards and forwards uneasily and returned to the table. He had not been mistaken; there were only two bits of rock where he had left three last night. Then he was angry as well as frightened, and swore aloud that all the cursed tomfoolery of a million demons should not keep him from his prize, and he kicked the table over with everything it contained, and then piled it all up again

and put things to rights with trembling fingers.

The second stone did not stay away so long as the first, for he found it in its place —marked like the other—when he came upstairs after the midday meal, although he had locked the door as usual on going down. Now he told himself that it must be one of his servants who was playing him a trick, and he wondered vaguely which of them would be so bold. He sounded the walls and the floor from end to end without finding any trace of an opening, and then sat down, pale and cold, to consider what method of self-defence to adopt.

If the true state of things were disclosed before he had induced Gilda to part with her share of the estate for a moderate sum, any minerals discovered there, or on the new property acquired as much with her money as with his, would be half hers, and he had no mind to divide the wealth of his possible gold mines with this bit of a school-girl, who might any day introduce a sharp-eyed man of business to him as his brother-in-law. Of course all this took place before Gilda returned and when Carlos had not so much as heard the name of Reggie McCalmont. His hope was that Gilda, unversed in farm matters, would take his depressed valuation as the correct one, and allow herself to be bought out for a few thousand pounds, which, carefully invested, would bring in quite as much as one woman could possibly need, according to his views, and that then he could develop his hidden riches unmolested. It would, of course, be fatal to this kind plan for the true state of things to become known before the bargain was concluded. If the Hacienda with its late additions promised, properly worked, a large output of gold, who could expect even such an inexperienced creature as Gilda to give up her claim to half the profits?

On the day when the third stone disappeared Gilda's letter came, announcing her own departure for Valparaiso by the next steamer, and in the six weeks which followed, Carlos, unable to stop her, felt as if stern fate were already on his track. In some way he connected the alarming freaks of the invisible imp who troubled his solitude with the girl's coming, and almost suspected the demons of trying to force him to be honest with her. He swore that he would not give up his well-earned riches for all the demons of the Andes, but no bluster could prevent his shivering a little every time that he entered the upper room, and every day it became more difficult for him to turn his eyes calmly towards the table where almost everything now was marked with that ominous red cross. He gathered a little comfort, such as it was, from his conviction that evil spirits would hardly dare to use that symbol at all. He himself was long past attaching respect to a sign of religion, but there seemed reason to hope that mere common bogies would not yet have reached his lofty and enlightened standpoint.

As Carlos sat in his dusty work-shop, the afternoon waned and sleep overtook him in revenge for many a wakeful working night. His head fell back against the old cushion, his hands dropped on his knees, and his regular breathing showed that this was not a mere light doze.

Then, quite noiselessly, a strange creature crept out, a pace at a time, from behind a pile of boxes and trailed its soft length over the boards. A grey puma skin covered its body, but it moved on brown human hands and feet, beside which the useless paws hung ragged to the ground, and Anton's green eyes looked out through the empty eyeholes. The hated master had returned to his study earlier than usual, and his cunning tormentor had had to lie in hiding for a couple of hours, during which he had suffered agonies of fear, and had felt the heavy stick already descending on his shoulders every time that Carlos moved. Now his opportunity had come, so with infinite precaution he dragged himself across the floor, sheltered, now by a table, now by an open cupboard door till, just behind the sleeper's chair, he reached the black mouth of an old chimney, full of hooks for curing hams, and going so straight to the upper air that a cold ray of daylight fell on the grey ashes of the inner hearth.

Then the puma boy seemed to grow smaller, the rough fell was tied closely round him by the forepaws, and he wriggled up the chimney, climbing from hook to hook, till nothing was seen but the grey tail hanging down above the ashes; then that too went up, and in a minute what looked like an enormous cat came out on

the roof and crouched in a depression of the tiles just over the place where Carlos was still slumbering peacefully in the silence of the attic.

It was a strange spot, this airy nest of the niño puma, and the only one where he felt absolutely safe in the solitude which was a necessity of his half-developed nature. No one ever came to look for him here, and it was over a year since the roof had wanted mending; he thought no one would ever come up "to-morrow"—which was his only way of regarding the future. Just behind the chimney, two pointed gables made a deep angle which resulted in an eyrie quite invisible from below, but open to the great dome of sky, to the everlasting sunshine by day and the puzzling stars by night. Here Anton would lie on his back hour after hour, watching the eagles hang over some gorge of the Andes, waiting till their prey should die; here he would drink the early drops of the autumn rain which ran first like little bullets down the dust-choked paths of the hills, and grew from drops to streams, from streams to raging torrents till the sun came high enough to lay his hot hand on them in the spring, and turn them back till another ten months of drought should have passed by and the world be parched and gasping for a drop of water, like Dives in hell.

The boy's treasures were stowed away here, in the recesses of an abandoned dovecote, the chief one of all just now being a pot of red paint stolen from some carpenters who had been sent to mend a barn. He had watched them lay it on the railings and window bars, and it seemed to him that it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life. He carried it off by stealth, and had decorated the chimney and the gables with several hundred red crosses like those which he had drawn on Carlos' stones. No one had been able to teach him to read or write, but one of the monks who occasionally came to visit the farm, had guided his hand till it could form the two lines of the cross, and his one piece of learning made Anton proudly happy. The puma skin also had its home on the roof in an old box, and Anton regarded it as a close relation. An Indian hunter had given it to Transito in return for food and shelter during one awful winter snowstorm, and her boy had made it his at once.

He had looked upon the attic as his playground till Carlos took possession of it, and he still liked to emphasise his rights by putting his own mark on anything at all attractive which it might contain. The red cross which filled Carlos with superstitious fear was merely the Puma-boy's mark. The adroit stealth which enabled Anton to come and go as he liked was nature's one compensation to him for many deprivations of heart and mind.

He sat behind his chimney now, gazing up the valley to the distant peaks. Suddenly his eyes brightened and the narrow pupils dilated with pleasure. He saw Gilda and Reggie returning towards the house. She was holding her white skirts together with one hand and had a bunch of wild flowers in the other. As Reggie said something she raised her head and smiled, looking toward the house. Anton thought that the smile was for him, and, jumping up, ran on all fours to a corner of the roof which was overshadowed by some old trees. In a moment he slid to the ground and picked both hands full of the splendid scarlet geraniums that grew against the wall. By the time Gilda reached the front door, he was standing there to welcome her, holding out the flowers with silent eagerness.

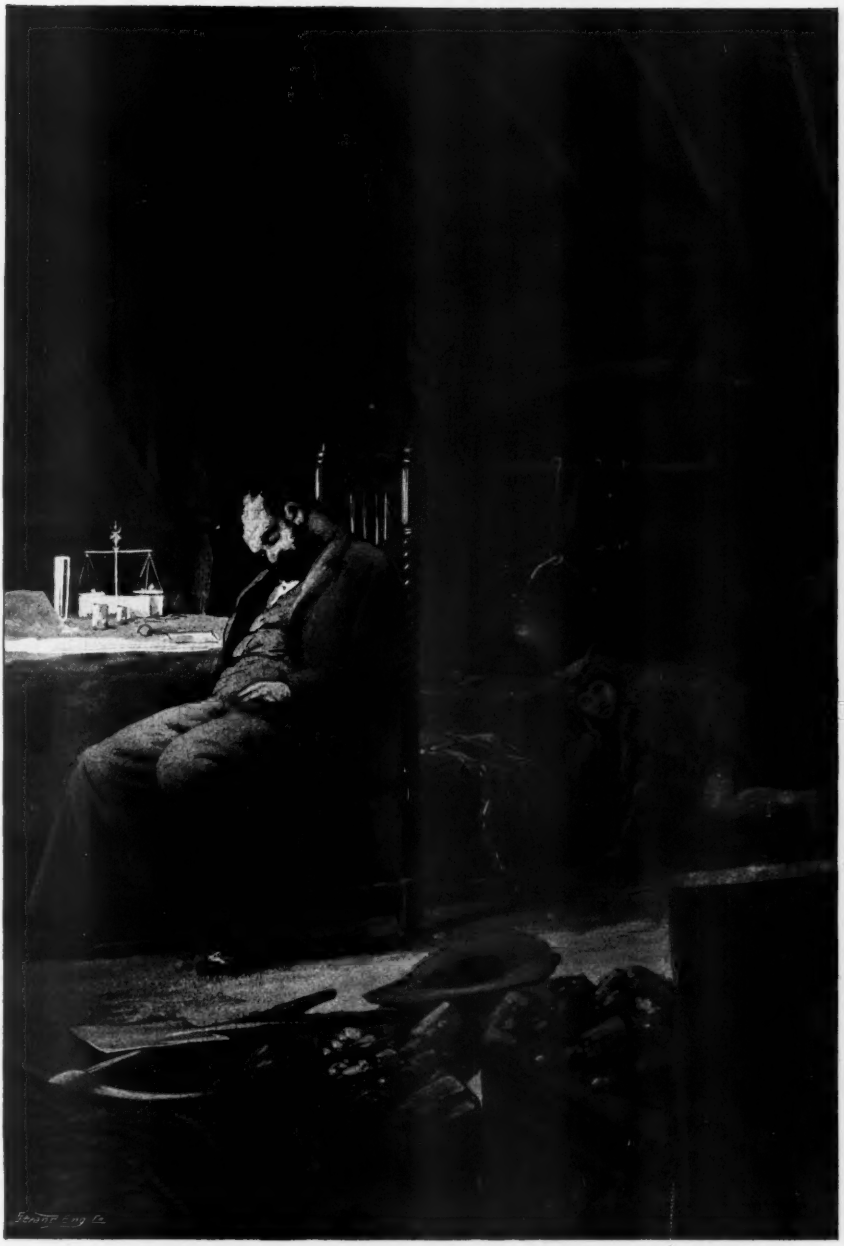
She took them and smiled again to thank him. "They are lovely, Antonsito," she said, "come into the house and I will give you a present too."

He followed her into the drawing-room, where the yellow satin chairs stood in rows with their backs to the wall, and two marble tables, bearing baskets of wax flowers, broke the empty length of the room. From one of them Gilda took a box of chocolate—(what girl ever finds herself without bonbons even in the wilds of the Andes?)—and put it into his hands.

"All for you," she said, patting his rough head. "Now run along and be happy."

Nobody had seen Ernie Wilson since lunch time, and as Gilda crossed the courtyard to her own room the thought struck her remorsefully that she had all but forgotten the poor little boy. She hurried in to put down her flowers and start on a search for him, when she saw a crumpled heap on the floor beside her bed.

"Ernie," she cried, flying to him, "what is the matter, dear?" His head was sunk



"Quite noiselessly a strange creature crept out and trailed its soft length over the boards"

on his hands and his little thin shoulders were heaving in sobs, while two dusty boots and torn stockings stretched out before him seemed to indicate that he had had a misfortune of some serious kind. He turned from her, and would not look up as she put her arms round him.

"You never remembered! You never remembered!" he wailed. "I came to look for you and you was gone with *him!*"

He raised a very grimy and tear-stained face to hers and brought out the last word with the vehemence of hatred, while he pushed away her hand and knocked his head against the side of the bed. Then Gilda remembered that she had promised to go out with him, and for a minute she felt very small indeed.

"Ernie dear," she pleaded, kneeling beside him on the floor and catching at his hands, "do forgive me. It was too simply horrid of me to go away and leave you. Oh, I am so sorry, and I missed you so much when I got away too far to come back and fetch you."

"Did you—really?" he said, looking a little less miserable. "But then, for what did you do it?"

There was no reply to this, so Gilda had to put a great truth into words.

"Ernie boy, when you get the sun right in your eyes, off the sea, in the morning, you can't see anything else, can you? Well, when one is going—to be married to somebody, it is just like that. There are ever so many people one loves and wants to be nice to, but the sun gets into one's eyes now and then, and one sees nothing else, and one behaves like a brute to the people one loves best in the world. And then one wants to knock one's head on the ground afterwards!"

"You ain't a brute," said Ernie, with two or three catches in his voice. His sturdy loyalty would not even let her abuse herself. "But you was always my Mrs. Edmondson till Reggie came, and—oh, please be my Mrs. Edmondson still!"

"Always, always, Ernie boy! Nothing shall ever change that, darling."

Whereat the lonely little man threw his arms round her neck and cried a little more on her shoulder, and was hugged and comforted in her soft arms till he felt that his birthright—just two months old—was restored to him, and Gilda began to tell him of all sorts of pleasant plans that she was making so that he could be very near her most of the time.

"And please, Mrs. Edmondson," he said very seriously, "get your blue sea-spectacles out of the trunk and always put them on when Reggie comes. Then the sun will never get into your eyes any more!"

VI

A FEW days passed very quietly at the Hacienda. Gilda had not yet had her explanation with Carlos, and though she had once or twice suggested that they should go over the accounts, he had always made an excuse for not doing so at that particular moment. She was not in any hurry, and after the movement and bustle of the voyage found great pleasure in the quiet walks, the long evenings in the patio, when the three friends sat together and sang or talked or kept silence, very much as they had done on the deck of the *Corotaxi*.

One evening—it was the 22nd of December—when Ernie, after keeping Gilda running about with him all day, had gone to bed early, he became the subject of a rather animated discussion between her and her betrothed. Ernie had insisted on treating Reggie with stern disapproval after Gilda's treason about the walk, and had just now refused to say good-night to him, while he made Gilda promise by all she held sacred to come and tuck him up in exactly ten minutes from the time he shut the drawing-room door.

"Getting a bit exigent, isn't he?" Captain McCalmont remarked as Gilda came back from keeping her word, with her pretty hair ruffled by Ernie's hugs. "How long do you mean to keep him up here?"

"As long as I like," she answered, with a fine flash of independence and a shade of rose mounting in her cheeks. They were alone in the yellow drawing-room, for Carlos always disappeared immediately after dinner.

"Oh," said Reggie, raising his eyebrows and looking surprised, "I am sorry I spoke."

"So am I," she replied, walking to the open window and standing there with her back to him.

"We generally agree, I think," said the

young man, without following her, and then he began to spell out the news of the day in a Spanish newspaper of small dimensions and politics as uncertain as its type.

Reggie could not make Gilda out. Why should she let herself be tyrannised over and worried by this child of strangers? Common kindness had long ago been left behind in her treatment of Ernie Wilson. Poor little chap! Of course one was sorry for him, and all that, but, really, come now —there was no need to treat him as if he were her own brother after all. The newspaper seemed very confused, and he pushed it away from him, and drew his chair back out of the strong rays of the lamp.

Gilda turned as she heard him move, and came and stood behind him. He did not look up, but stared rather sadly at the yellow-shaded lamp. Then the lightest of kisses rested for an instant on his fair hair, and Gilda's hand came over his shoulder, and lay there beseechingly. He turned his head and kissed it softly.

"Come outside," said the girl; "nobody can talk reasonably with that hot yellow lamp staring in their eyes."

He laughed happily. "We came near having a tiff, and it was all the lamp's fault, wasn't it?"

"Of course!" she declared. "Now, isn't it much nicer out here?"

The moon was flooding the courtyard, and the acacia trees in the corners were shaking delicate perfumes from their clusters of blossom, hanging like aerial censers between earth and sky. A hammock swung between the columns in the night breeze, and Gilda sank down into it, and pushed herself backwards and forwards with the tip of a dainty shoe which seemed to be mooring her to the ground for fear that her light draperies should sail off with her in the wind's wake. Her arm was twisted in the rope, and gleamed white in the silver wash of moonlight, and her head rested against it silently. Her face was serious, and her eyes sweet and dusky with some new hope or regret.

Reggie seated himself in a cane chair close to her hammock, in a line with her face. There was something that wanted saying, but neither seemed in any haste to begin.

"It had to come, I suppose," said she at last with a little sigh.

"What had to come?" he asked quickly, leaning forward to look into her face.

"That you should find out that I have a bad temper, and that I should think you were—perhaps thinking——"

"I have occasionally attempted that feat," said he with mock gravity. "Was I supposed to be thinking of anything in particular?"

"Oh, don't laugh about everything, Reggie! Can't you see when one is strung up, and glad and sorry about twenty things, and not a bit inclined to make jokes? I thought for a minute that you were actually getting jealous of poor little Ernie, of all people!"

"I, jealous!" said Reggie, opening his blue eyes very wide. "My dear girl, you must be dreaming! I only thought it was a pity to let him tyrannise over you—to spoil him, in fact, as you really are doing, you know."

"If it is not Ernie, what is it?" she cried. "You are quite different, and you seem not to care, somehow. If, by any chance, you know, you should have changed your mind—I have a right to know, at any rate."

"Changed my mind—what about?" he asked, looking really puzzled.

"Oh, why do you make one say horrid things? About me, of course! I am so afraid you have found out that I am not nearly so nice as you thought me—and I have been very cross once or twice, I know."

"I believe you are proud of it," said Reggie, laughing now. "Do you want me to say I shall go in fear of my life after the next month or two? That I shall bind you over to keep the peace before the clergyman who marries us? I don't mind. I am dreadfully afraid of you, of course!"

"I don't care whether you are afraid or not," said Gilda, sitting up straight, and bringing her little heels sharply down on the flags. "I don't believe you care for me any more! You have not said a word about it since this morning!"

There was only one way to answer such a calumny. The accused kicked over his chair, and sat down beside her in the hammock, and there was a silence which said all manner of tender things. Love has no country, and speaks as sweetly under

alien skies as in the classic moonlight of Verona. Love also has no date; a man and a maid, pure and young and warm of heart, hear the birds that sang for Adam and Eve, and tread, at least for one short day, the embowered paths of Paradise.

"Will you believe it now?" he whispered, holding up her face to the moon, and smiling into her sweet grey eyes.

"Till next time," said Eve's daughter, 'twixt kiss and kiss. "It is so sweet to be told! I mean to quarrel every day by-and-by! Who's that?"

A shadow had passed under the archway which led to the outer world. Gilda sprang from Reggie's side like a startled deer, and looked round the court.

"Only a servant, I suppose," he answered. "There was nobody here before; the place is as light as day! Sing me something, Gilda! It is just the night for one of your strange songs."

She knew many a wild Habanera, and had sung them to him half under her breath at sea. She went in and fetched her mother's guitar—a hundred years old, and so full of music that it used to sigh it out alone at night when a breeze blew through the empty room.

Gilda perched herself on the arm of the chair, and sang an old song which had passed from mouth to mouth in the country side till few could have told its meaning.

"The sun is Lord of heaven,
He laughs 'twixt earth and sky,
The night makes all things even,
The sun must sink and die.

They came like suns for glory,
Shining from feet to head;
They heard a golden story,
They guard the treasure—dead.

Through seas of blood they found it,
Gold is their only tomb,
Their blood ran red around it,
Their lust became their doom.

In vain the conquerors seek it,
The guards are dumb and pale,
The rocks shall keep the secret,
The vultures tell no tale."

"That is a cheerful kind of song," remarked Reggie, as the strange minors crept down the strings and shivered away in the night. "I am afraid it will give me a chill! I never heard anything so weird and cold in my life! What is it all about?"

"Couldn't say," replied Gilda, who was quite happy now. "There is a story of poor Spaniards killed to guard a gold mine, I believe. Transito says it is where the vulture always hangs over the peak to the north; she thinks he is part of the show. I'll sing something more cheerful." And she rattled off

"Me gustan todas,
Me gustan todas en general,"

with its gay refrain like the click of the castañetas at every line end.

Under the archway, where it opened on the road, crouched Anton, his hands clasped round his knees as he rocked himself in time to Gilda's singing and the sharp thrum of the guitar strings. He was gazing at the moonlit valley from a shadowy corner (for he had the wild animal's instinct of concealment), and he was happier than he had ever been before. Life was made intensely interesting by his hatred for Carlos, and Gilda's kindness was flooding every corner of his poor mind with sunshine. This beautiful lady was the first he had ever seen, and she gave him sweets, and smiled at him. He put up his brown hand to feel the place where she had patted his head, and then held his palm out to the light, expecting to see it shine. Even as he did so, his quick ear caught the sound of a step moving softly down the disused avenue at the north side of the house. In an instant he had rounded the corner on hands and knees in a strip of shadow, and was peering out cautiously towards the path.

He had not been mistaken. The master was standing close under the acacia trees with something over his shoulder, apparently listening. Anton understood that he was starting for one of his long walks among the hills, understood that he wished to go unseen. Gilda's music was still floating to his ear from the inner patio, but hate is stronger than love, and the Puma-boy drew himself back to the corner of the house, sprang to his feet the moment he was safe from Carlos' eyes, and ran like a deer to the tree by which he could climb to the roof.

When he slid down again the puma skin was bound round his little body, and he

presented the strange appearance of an enormous grey cat walking on its hind legs and carefully carrying its tail in one hand. Carlos had moved a hundred yards or so down the grassy road when Anton sighted him again. He seemed to be waiting from time to time so that the moon should throw blacker shadows across his path. At last he strode away at a brisk pace, followed by a shadowy grey thing on noiseless bare feet. Anton passed from one blot of shadow to another as long as the trees lasted, and when, after half an hour's sharp walking, Carlos came out on the hillside, his pursuer was so much the same colour as the dusty slope and its thorny growths that, but for the small shadow he cast, he seemed a bit of the mountains himself.

As the moon rose higher Carlos climbed with it, following a track which was not only trodden in the hard soil but cut in the rock where the rock would have interrupted it. Carlos knew the path well as leading to a cave where he had often taken shelter from sun or storm, but he also knew that the old track had not been thus carefully scratched through a hundred obstacles merely to lead to an empty cave. Beyond the cave it branched off in five or six directions, and he still hoped that in one of them might lie the fabled mine which he had so long been seeking. The moment he found it his fortune would be made, for he and his friends in Santiago—the expert and the bank director—were prepared to float a company which would appear colossal on paper, and the unjust judge, for a small consideration, would give judgment for him if Gilda applied for her rights in the matter. Only two things remained to be done. The chief vein of ore must be found, and Gilda must be bought out now, while the property was reported to be in a depreciated condition. He had got quite used to the portents which had so alarmed him a month or two earlier, and could see red crosses all over his room without being much startled, although there was that in his past which made him unwilling to attract any supernatural attention.

The expert had visited the place two years before, and had gone away without finding any lode sufficiently rich to repay the working of it, but Carlos was not discouraged. He felt sure that the gold was there and that he should find it; and as for Gilda—he would be a fool, he told himself, if he could not induce an ignorant girl to accept the arrangement which he was so anxious to make for her good.

So, while Reggie and Gilda, rich in fair joy and trust, sat and sang, and talked, and sang again, in the old patio where the warm moonlight brought out the scents of the jessamine buds, Carlos climbed the mountain path for the hundredth time, sure that success was not far off now; and his little enemy followed his every step, longing intensely, in his formless hatred, to see some harm fall upon the man he dogged. Whenever the cautious Carlos turned to look back the grey cat was nothing but a low mound among the scrub; when he went on it crept relentlessly behind him, step for step.

The path lay higher over the hills, and now even the aloes and the prickly pear clumps were left behind. They had passed a sulphurous spring where the water dripped from rock to rock with an evil smell, and gathered in pools on whose surface the moon floated in distorted reflections. More than one real puma had fled from the man's footstep, hissing as it slid away in the darkness, but when at last he reached the blind cave which ran like a burrow into the hillside, the Puma-boy was only a few feet away from him, doubled into a ball behind a boulder. The hill flattened slightly here, and Carlos sat down at one side of the opening to rest after his long climb. He pulled a paper out of his pocket and spread it on the ground, where it cracked and scraped against the loose rubble. It was a rough plan of the mountain tracks, which he had occasionally found dangerously misleading without some such guide. In the clear moonlight the heavy black strokes were quite visible and he bent down over it, following a line with his finger and looking out over the neighbouring peaks where its counterpart wandered like a dusty snake. The cave behind him had been the point of departure of many a fruitless walk, in spite of which he still held the conviction that this was the district in which to seek "El Tesoro de Los Araucos," as the mythical mine was called by the country people. He never entered the cave now, as it seemed to contain no clue to that which he sought.

As he bent over his paper, kneeling on

one knee and intent on finding a track which he had once struck but had not followed up, he heard something stir inside the cave behind him. In an instant he was on his feet and had drawn his old revolver from his pocket. A slight crunching sound showed that he had not been mistaken, and he faced about and saw in the darkness two points of light low down near the ground, while a curious hissing noise told him that he had disturbed some beast in hiding.

Without hesitation he fired at the creature, taking aim by the eyes which shone green in the dark, but the revolver kicked, and as the report thundered out over the silent hills a large puma shot past his feet and flew down the slope, while a crash of stones and a smell of fresh fallen earth within showed that his bullet had struck the wall of the cave.

In a moment he had lighted the little lantern which he always carried, and threw its rays from side to side of the opening. There were no more pumas, but where his bullet had struck the rock a quantity of earth and loose fragments had fallen away leaving a flat surface of flint freshly exposed. Hoping for some trace of gold, Carlos approached, and held his lantern to the stone, moving it up and down, so as to minutely examine every part. Suddenly his hand began to shake violently, and he put out his other hand to steady himself against the wall, while he moved the light up to the point from which he had started and began to scrutinise the grey surface with intense care. He leaned forward as he did so, and his pale face and staring eyes came within the circle of light. It was a strange picture, this dark seeker with his little light of earth, trembling as he sought to discover her secrets, while behind him the low mouth of the cave was flooded with white moonlight, and Anton's pale eyes watched him from under the puma skin, whose ears stood up weirdly against the sky as the boy, keeping his body out of sight, stretched his neck into the opening to see what the master had found.

He might have stood there safely enough without any such precautions, for Carlos had found something which absorbed all his faculties for the moment, and set his heart beating so triumphantly that he could hardly hold his lantern steady while he looked. The yellow rays showed some curious lines in the rock, red lines, cut deep and filled with caked cochineal, as fresh as if it had been rubbed into them yesterday. They seemed to represent a rude landscape, for at the top of the stone was the unmistakable outline of the giant Aconcagua, whose huge truncated mass towered away on the right of the hills which held the cave. Below were the heads of three peaks which Carlos knew right well, since they rose round the Red Pool called the "Cup of Blood," the pool where he had raked and washed for gold for months together. And on that buried stone which his chance shot had laid bare, a red line, deeply scored, went in between the passes, turned twice round the last hill of the three, far to the left of Aconcagua, and stopped at a spot a little below the summit on the north side. There the red line ran straight into the mountain for a little way, then dropped precipitately for two or three inches, and where it stopped Carlos' breath seemed to stop too, for the scratches took the unmistakable likeness of a man, with a pointed headpiece, and a sword—the old cross-handled sword—in his hand. Rude as the picture was, there was no mistaking the intention to portray a Spanish soldier, one of the conquerors who made the west coast run with blood in the hungry search for gold—even as Carlos would have done had he come into the world some three centuries earlier.

When Carlos was convinced that the clue he had sought for five years was at last and in truth in his hands, he put his lantern on the ground and sank down beside it, leaning his head against the rock, faint for joy. This buried stone accounted for the footmarks to the cave. Generation had passed the secret on to generation of untamed Indians, and doubtless they would come once and again to see that time had not obliterated the old marks, where the cochineal must have been renewed not very long ago, to look so redly bright. On examining the fallen stones he found that they were fragments of an irregular slab, which must have been laid against the face of the graven one, and kept in place by a few loose pieces which his shot had scattered.

When he had collected himself a little, he set to work to copy the plan with great care on the back of his own map. It took him a

long time to accomplish the task by the fitful light of his lantern ; he was very particular to get the distance right on the third peak, a terribly abrupt one, which he had considered too far removed from what he considered the gold-producing district to be worth exploring. A mistake there might land him in a spot from which return would be difficult, so he copied the lines as exactly as he could, and afterwards tried to cover the rock again lest some wandering tribe should come this way and destroy the precious landmark in anger that it had been discovered. Then he came out and stood at the cave door, gazing towards Aconcagua, which appeared from here rising beyond the three subordinate peaks precisely as the Indians had drawn it.

The untrodden heights with their eternal snows were gleaming silver in the moonlight, and the lonely Cordillera seemed to spread its scarred bosom for the night's healing kiss. The vales below were still and dark, for the night was waning, and the moon sinking a little from the zenith. Aromatic smells of high growing herbs travelled on the night air, and everything was bathed in the holy silence of the hills. On such a night a prophet would have seen the centuries striving to overtake Eternity, a wise man would have thanked God for the perfect hush laid on the million clamours of the earth, a poet would have wept tears of joy for the night's speechless peace ; but poor Carlos knew and cared for nothing but the clue to riches which he had sought and found.

As he went down the hill he told himself jubilantly that it was all ended now ; the struggle and the uncertainty were over for ever, and he was the master of untold wealth.

But in truth many obstacles lay between him and it, and it would have been more to his peace had they been insurmountable.

The boy Anton had lain beside his boulder for a full hour after Carlos had disappeared in the darkness of the vale. He was not sleeping, but watching the stars set behind Aconcagua, a sure sign that the day was not far off. He was quite fearless out on the hillside, like the other creatures who seek their meat from God ; nothing had ever hurt him there, and he had never wanted to hurt anything—till Carlos had beaten him. Then he had learnt what hatred meant, but being young and small could find no adequate means of revenge, though he sought for them with care. Like an angry pixie he could play many an impish trick, but it still seemed out of his power to really hurt the big dark man whose presence fascinated and terrified him.

Now, since Gilda's kindness had awakened another chord in his heart, a second object appeared to his misty consciousness—the desire to bring her something which should please her. He had watched Carlos copy the marks on the stone with earnest care, therefore he decided that they must be something precious. He would copy them for the Señorita who had such a sweet voice and who kept boxes of such delightful brown lumps as she had given him to eat the day before. But he had no lantern, so he must wait for daylight. Meanwhile he would try and get a prickly pear leaf and a thorn to draw with ; he had often amused himself with scratching over the smooth grey surface.

So he wandered down the hill till he came to a clump of thorned ficus spreading its great grey hands in every direction. Skilfully he detached one and scraped off its numberless needles with an old knife which he had stolen from Carlos, and, when its surface was safe to deal with, put it carefully aside, and went a little further on to cut the sharp point off an aloes sword which had torn his clothes as he crept up the hill. He brought leaf and thorn to the mouth of the cave on the crest, and then lay down and slept on his puma skin till the sun sent hot red rays under his eyelashes, and woke him in the morning.

Gilda had refused to go to bed as long as the moon shone into the courtyard, and it was nearly one o'clock when Reggie carried her guitar indoors, and saw her disappear behind the mat curtain which hung over the entrance of her bedroom. Then, since a man always feels bound to sit up later than a woman, even if she talks till daylight, he wandered into a little room off the drawing-room, which appeared to be used as a library ; there were a few books in shelves about the walls, and a dusty writing-table near a window. He had brought the objectionable lamp with him, and began to look for a book to read himself to sleep with. The collection seemed to deal with only two subjects

minerals and religion. The works on religion were all in Spanish, so he left them aside and pulled out a well-fingered manual of mineralogy which let fall a little shower of marks out of its pages as he turned them over. They were all set in a portion of the book called "Minerals of the Aconcagua District," and, attracted by the title, he sat down near the lamp, and began to read with that complete absorption in the subject which seems to be a distinctly masculine characteristic. What woman ever reads a book when she is in love? No writer ever lived who could tell her anything half so interesting and enchanting as her own heart is telling her then. But a man's brain seems to have an existence of its own, and will have food of its own in proportion.

So Reggie McCalmont read on and on, of volcanoes and glacier beds, of gold in high levels and copper under the sea, till at last the lamp went out with a groan, and the cool daylight shone in from the courtyard. Then he tucked the book under his arm and found his way to his own quarters, walking without his shoes so as not to wake Ernie, whose room opened out of his. It was a warm night, and everything was standing open to the air.

Towards seven o'clock Gilda stirred in her sleep and dreamt that the stewardess of the *Corotaxi* was bringing in her tea; but having spent half the night in singing and talking among the jessamines in the patio, she did not wake till two hours later, when Transito, fat and smiling, stood beside her and pushed back the white curtains of her bed to offer her the morning "matesito," a strange cup of thick green tea with a silver tube to drink it through.

"Buenos dias, mi hijita," said the good soul. "Why, what is this?"

As Gilda sat up, shaking her curly hair out of her eyes, something slipped off the sheet and fell to the floor with a thud. Transito stooped to pick it up and then let it drop again with an exclamation, as a sharp spine ran into her finger. Gilda pushed away her tray and leaning over the edge of her bed saw on the floor a prickly pear pat, thick and large and hard, with some strange lines drawn across and across it.

"Where did it come from?" she said wonderingly. "Pick it up with your apron, Transito; I want to look at it!"

Transito did as she was bid, and slid the thing from a fold of her apron to the tray. Nobody wants a ficus needle in their fingers, for it is popularly supposed to be poisonous, and to stay for ever.

"What a queer thing!" said Gilda. "See, there is a drawing on it, three little mountains and a big one. Where can it have come from?"

"It is that most wicked and presumptuous son of my misfortunes," said Transito; "he is always scratching pictures on everything—and now he has the audacity to bring this here! He shall have no casuela this morning!"

"But I like his bringing me things," said Gilda. "Poor boy, he means to give me pleasure. I forbid you to say a word to him, Transito! Mind, I shall be very angry if you do!"

So the pear pat was stuck up against the looking-glass, where the giver, peeping in, might see that it was appreciated; and Gilda told the story at breakfast, by way of making conversation for her rather constrained little circle. Reggie and Carlos never spoke to each other if they could help it, and Ernie, having pulled his chair very close to Gilda's, kept fishing strange things out of his great soup-plate of casuela and commenting on them with much wonder.

"It's got drumsticks and vegetables, and maize and eggs in it," he remarked. "Seems an awful waste to put all that together, and only call it soup, doesn't it?"

"You needn't eat it if you don't like it," said Carlos, who could not bear children. "What did you say was the picture on that pear pat, Gilda?"

He spoke lightly, but he looked sharply at her as she answered:

"Three little hills and a big one, and a creature hung on a line. I wonder what was in the poor boy's head when he drew it!"

"He is quite crazy," said Carlos; "I don't think you had better encourage him so much. He can give a lot of trouble when he gets naughty."

"He seems very gentle and harmless," Gilda answered with a little note of defiance in her voice. Reggie spoke to avert a disagreement.

"Can you lend me something to ride to Santiago?" he asked of Carlos. "I think I ought to go down for a day or two to see a

cousin of mine who has come with the flagship. I have just heard from him."

A letter lay beside his plate with the Valparaiso post mark. Gilda's face fell.

"Certainly," said Edmondson brightening up, "but you had better have the carriage since you will want to take your things."

Reggie smiled a little at this broad hint to be gone, but he answered composedly,

"I shall not take all my things, since I mean to come back if you and Gilda"—here he turned to her—"will let me stay for a few days longer."

"You will not be away long, will you?" said Gilda quickly.

"No longer than I can help," he replied. "It is very good of you to let me have the carriage, Edmondson. Can I start soon?"

"As soon as you like," said Carlos somewhat ungraciously.

"By the way," said Reggie, "I came on a very interesting book of yours last night, Edmondson, about the Aconcagua minerals. You ought to find gold on your land, I should think."

Then Carlos was very angry. "Gold?" he said with a sneer. "Oh, of course, every fool who ever lived thought he was going to find gold, and some of them have lost their lives over it, and all their time and money. There isn't an ounce of gold between this and Lima. The 'Conquistadores' swept the country clean."

"Oh, no doubt you know best," said Reggie dubiously; "but then what is Gilda's queer story of a sealed mine near here? There are such stories afloat all along the coast, are there not?"

"Yes, indeed," said Gilda. "I remember poor papa used to say that there were lodes which would well repay the working if anybody had energy for that sort of thing. Only he was satisfied with the property as it was, for it brought in a good deal in those days."

"So it does now," said Carlos, off his guard for once. Reggie and Gilda both stared at him, and he saw his mistake. "I mean to say, enough for one to live on with care—nothing like enough to break it up for impossible mines. What time do you want the 'coche'?"

"Must you go?" Gilda pleaded, looking very beseeching.

"Don't you go away, Redge," said Ernie, who seemed to have forgiven his friend's sins; "me and Mrs. Edmondson will miss you bad!"

"I shall come back very soon," replied Reggie, "probably in two days, so as to be here in time for Christmas, if I really am not in the way, Edmondson?"

He thought it better to conciliate Carlos a little, since Gilda was to be left up here alone with him.

"Not at all," replied the other man, in his curious dead voice, "delighted to have you, of course."

So Reggie went rattling off in the old carriage, drawn by two mules and a horse, all harnessed abreast. He waved his cap to Gilda as he disappeared, and she and Ernie returned rather sadly to the house.

VII

"Do you know, Ernie, I have a kind of idea that you ought to be doing some lessons," said Gilda, looking down at him as he stood by her side under the cool archway.

"Oh no," he cried, "I am going to talk to you all the time till he comes back. I have ever so many things to tell you!"

"Well, begin," commanded she, "only let us find something to sit on, shall we?"

"These'll do," he replied, pointing to two low stone steps inside the doorway, intended for mounting a horse.

"The begin is like this," he went on, when they had taken their seats, and Gilda, leaning her chin on both hands, seemed prepared to receive his confidences.

"I do like that pink frock of yours, Mrs. Edmondson. Mother never has pink frocks."

"Is that what you want to say, you funny boy?" she laughed, amused at the idea of Mrs. Wilson, with her thin parting and brown-paper complexion, in pink cotton.

"Why isn't all the people nice and pretty and young?" he asked wistfully, with a child's adoration of what is lovely and gay.

"I don't know, Ernie," she answered quite gravely. "I expect they will be when they get to heaven, you know."

"I don't like heaven," said Ernie, making a wry face.

"What do you know about it, old boy?" asked his friend.

"Oh, that dreadful hymn mother makes me say when I'm naughty, about congregations ne'er break up and Sabbaths never end. I wish there was some other nice place for good boys to go to."

"Do you call yourself a good boy?" said Gilda, pinching his ear. She was careless about utilising occasions for sermons. The next world seemed very far away as they two sat in the stone archway with the blazing sun at either end and the breeze blowing through over their heads.

Suddenly Anton came and stood before them, his naked feet dusty as the stones, and a soft lump of some kind held tightly inside his torn cotton shirt. His face looked quite softened and happy.

"What is it, hijito?" asked Gilda, holding out her hand to him. He came a step closer, and carefully opened his shirt enough to let a little pointed muzzle and a pair of bright eyes peep out between the folds.

"A baby fox!" she exclaimed. "O Ernie, look!"

It was quite a tiny thing, and Anton had caught it on the hillside in the dawn. He took it in both hands and dropped it in Gilda's lap, where it lay, a soft wisp of fur with eyes that seemed to know everything. She put her two hands round it, and then looked up, for Carlos was standing under the archway with the dazzling light of the patio behind him, and the grey shadows of the roof on his face.

"Send that creature away, Gilda," he said, glancing angrily at Anton. "I want to talk to you."

"Just what Ernie said," she replied. "Here, Ernie, take care of it." And she lowered the little wild thing on his tightly joined knees, and rising, went to where Carlos seemed to be waiting for her. Anton had fled at the sight of his master.

Carlos led Gilda into the small room where Reggie had sat and read the night before. There were two or three books on the writing-table, heavy folio account-books, and one lay open, with long lines of figures on its pages.

Carlos placed a chair for his sister, and she sat down, casting a puzzled glance at the open folio.

"Well," she said, "I suppose we are going to talk business. Please begin."

He pulled his chair to the table, and leant his elbow on it, shading his eyes with his fingers, and looking at her keenly. Then he spoke.

"You are doing me a great injustice, Gilda. You have come all the way from England to this remote place, merely to convince yourself that I am robbing you. You show very little sisterly feeling, I must say."

"I came all the way from England to this remote place, as you call it, because it is my home, and I have a right to be here as much as I please. What kind of brotherly feeling was it that kept me away for all those years, and that preferred not to see anything of me till I was old enough to refuse to stay away any longer? You have been odiously hard and unkind, Carlos."

He turned away from her, and leant his back against the table, his face to the darkened room.

"If you are going to make stupid scenes," he said, "I shall think it a pity that you came at all. You have spent a great deal of money on the journey, and you are nothing like so well off as you think."

"You speak as if you were glad to say it," she cried. "I don't recognise you, Carlos! When I was a little thing there was nothing you would not do for me. I remember your carrying me on your back for miles among the hills because I was tired. You never spoke a cross word to me in your life, and your letters were the joy of my heart in that dreary school, till suddenly you stopped writing, and I did not get a word for two years! And then—horrid short little business letters; even your hand was changed! What is it? Why should we be enemies who used to love each other so dearly?"

He had been moving impatiently in his chair while she spoke, and now he answered in tones of irritation.

"We need not be enemies. Don't pick absurd quarrels with me because of letters I did not answer seven or eight years ago, when I was ill and away from home. I am only thinking of your good, and since you have let me understand very clearly that you suspect me of cheating you, I insist upon your going through the books with me and getting a clear view of the actual state of things. Only I think it right to warn

you that, in spite of all my efforts, the Hacienda has depreciated greatly in value, and that you are not the heiress your father intended you to be."

"Why don't you say our father, Carlos?" she asked, with a softened look in her eyes. "Poor papa! He was so proud of you in the old days."

She looked at the dark-skinned, heavy, middle-aged man before her, trying to see behind his lineaments the kind handsome boy whom her childhood had worshipped. But the intervening years had changed him too completely, physically and morally, and she felt that she was practically dealing with a stranger.

"Oh yes—our father, if you like," he replied. "Well, things were different in those days, and for the time his fortune was a considerable one. But now, with war prices become permanent, and life costing more every year, while the land gets poorer——"

"I do not believe the land is poorer," said Gilda, interrupting him. "Reggie, who ought to know, because his home is in a farming district, says that he never saw better crops or fitter-looking cattle!"

"Nevertheless, I am right," said Edmondson with some assumption of dignity. "If you will give your attention to these accounts, you will see that in order to pay you the large allowance which you have had of late, I have actually cheated myself, and have made you a present of a considerable sum every year."

Gilda looked very angry, though she tried to speak quietly.

"Then you did a most unjustifiable thing, and I am not at all grateful, Carlos. Am I a child or a lunatic, that actual facts cannot be explained to me? What right had you to let me go on believing myself a wealthy woman, when in reality I was nothing of the sort?"

"You are strangely ungrateful," said her brother, knitting his brows.

"I am exceedingly displeased," she said hotly. "I had a right to know the truth, and had I known it, I should have acted on it like any other sensible person. I shall pay you back every penny, even if it leaves me bankrupt and I have to go out and earn my living like those brave English girls that I used to be so sorry for."

"I fancy Captain McCalmont would hardly allow you to ruin yourself, and him, in order to pay me," said Carlos. "I do not want repayment. I only want you to understand that I have done the best I could for you according to my lights."

"You have done the very worst," said Gilda with tears of vexation in her eyes. "You might have had a little more confidence in my sense and affection."

"Now will you look at this record of five years' produce and compare it with the expenses of the place? You will see that the outgoings exceed the income by some thousands of dollars now."

"Then how dared you write and propose to apply my 'surplus income' to improvements?" Gilda asked. She was deeply hurt at having been treated like a wayward, selfish child. Her question was rather an uncomfortable one for Carlos to answer. He murmured something about a small sum coming in from a mortgage which had expired, and then resolutely pushed his great account books towards her, confident that she would understand nothing of the contents. But Gilda meant to master the matter at last. She would make it impossible for him to deceive her again, she said to herself. So she read on, taking out her silver pencil and making a little mark against certain items as they reappeared on the list.

"These seem to be rather fancy accounts," she said at last, looking up. "It seems odd that one month you should have sold a hundred cheeses for three pesos each, and that four weeks afterwards you should have accepted seventy pesos for the second hundred. What had happened in the cheese market?"

Carlos leant over the page frowning, and ran his finger up the items. Gilda was reading with more attention than he had expected her to bring to bear on these dry details.

"Ah," he said, "I see. The second lot were an inferior cheese. You cannot be expected to understand these things."

"I certainly cannot," Gilda replied gravely, still drawing her fingers down two lines of entries. "It seems to me that hardly any article is marked twice at the same price. And"—here she slowly turned over a dozen pages of the great leger—"with every month that passes the things bought become dearer,

those sold cheaper. No wonder that our affairs are involved."

This was the moment for Carlos to make his proposal about selling the whole thing. He cleared his throat.

"Yes, they are going badly, and on the whole I am glad you are here, my dear, for I think the time has come when it really might be wiser——"

He hesitated, and she looked up quickly but did not speak.

"Really wiser," he continued, "to sell the old place altogether and to give up this farming business. You could take your little fortune over to England and invest it as you like."

"And you?" she said, with bent brows.

"Oh, I—I am sick of it all. I should go in for the nitrate business in the north. It pays far better."

"I should have?" asked his sister.

"Oh, if we sold it well, forty or fifty thousand pesos. Quite a little fortune, all in your own hands."

"That means, at the outside, five thousand pounds," Gilda replied, "and an income which would be practically penury. I have not learnt to live on two hundred a year."

"But you will soon be married," he argued. "McCalmont must have something. You would only want your own fortune for pin-money."

"That is my affair," she said curtly. "But I had rather never have any more pin-money in my life than sell the dear old house where I was born, the only place that ever was home to me. What has become of the house in Santiago where we used to go in winter?"

"The lease expired," he replied. "It was not really your father's. He had only rented it."

Again the curious phrase "your father." Gilda began to understand what Reggie had meant when he was talking about knocking his head against unseen walls. She closed the ledger sharply, pushed it away on the table, and sat for a moment, gazing out to the courtyard, while her five fingers clasped and unclasped nervously. Carlos looked at her without speaking, thinking that when she broke silence it would probably be to accept his proposition. But he was disappointed.

"I know," she began at last, looking up in his face, "I know that it must seem like the most impossible presumption for an ignorant girl to come here and set herself up to criticise your methods and your work:" She paused to give him time to speak, but he was silent, and she went on. "But all the same, Carlos, there is nobody else who can say anything, and I must tell you what I think and how it all strikes me. Surely there is great mismanagement somewhere. This was supposed to be one of the largest and most valuable properties in the country, and after having it in your hands for a few short years, you have brought it down to about a tenth of what used to be considered its value. Of course, I am ignorant," she went on, warming with her own arguments, "but it seems to me that even I should refuse to sell an Alderney for fifty pesos and buy a wretched Argentine bull for two hundred, as these acccunts make out that you have done."

The accounts held notes of some strange transactions too preposterous for this quick-witted girl to pass over. When Carlos prepared them so as to give an inquirer the worst impression of the property, he had forgotten that he had a well-educated Englishwoman to deal with.

"Everybody's property has lost in value," he said. "We are not nearly so unfortunate as some of our neighbours."

"That may be," replied Gilda, "but all this misfortune seems to have set in suddenly after our poor Intendente died, and I cannot help thinking that you are wrong in not getting another good man in his place. Why try to manage what you evidently do not understand? I am sure you are cheated all the time. Poor Cobos, I wish he were here now."

Carlos laughed a little uneasily. "What is the use of wishing that when the poor fellow is dead? He fell over a precipice on that awful pass to Mendoza. I never saw him again."

"But surely you could have recovered his body?" Gilda persisted. "What an awful thing to leave him lying there!"

"We could not have got down alive," said Carlos. "He must have been killed at once. And the condors don't give you time to find anything." He shuddered.

"But after that, when you were away at San Salvador for all those years, who looked after things here?"

"Oh, this man that we have now. But I wrote all the time, and made him send me the accounts. My lungs were bad, and I dared not come down even for a day. When I returned here none of the people knew me."

"I should not have known you," said the girl. "I never saw a man so altered. You are much more like what I remember of Cobos. He was so much older than you."

"Suppose we get back to business?" suggested Carlos. "I have had something like an offer for the place, and really, my dear sister, I think we should be great fools to refuse, for we may not get such another."

"I won't hear of it," said Gilda, turning obstinate again. And though Carlos talked, and explained, and tried to be very persuasive, she refused to be convinced, and at last said that, sorry as she was to be forced into harsh measures, she would insist upon a legal inquiry into past mismanagement and an impartial expert's opinion of the property before any further steps were taken.

"I did not come unprovided for such a contingency," she said. "Mr. Freake saw to that, and gave me letters to the right people. I hoped I should not have to use them. I hoped that you and I would understand each other as we always did in the old days. But you have gone a thousand miles away from me, Carlos, and bitter as it is to say it, I don't trust you. I shall do what is necessary for my own defence."

She rose and left the room. All the sunshine seemed to have gone from the day as she crossed the patio, and when she reached the seclusion of her own apartment she broke down and had a long cry over the injustice of fate which forced her into sordid quarrels just when life should be full of peace and poetry.

Then, being of a very practical disposition, she dried her eyes, and wrote to the lawyer in Santiago, enclosing the letter given her by her old friend in London, who had foreseen some such emergency as this.

When Carlos had seen the door close behind her, he dropped his head in his hands and seemed absorbed in thought. The task was turning out a more difficult one than he had anticipated. Difficult! To persuade an inexperienced girl, a thing of smiles and bonbons and pink flounces, of his superior wisdom! Had he known her sooner, he would have cooked those cursed accounts far more artistically. As it was, he had overdone things, and her sharp eyes had seen the mistake. And now she was going to write to one of those Santiago lawyers (always hungry for remunerative litigation) to come up here and look into matters for her. Well, that letter should never go at any rate, for he always locked the post-bag himself before giving it to the "peon," who rode eight miles with it every day to the nearest post office. But that could only delay things for a little, and the English lover would be coming back to have the whole story poured into his sympathetic ears. The net seemed to be closing in on him on the other side too, for there was that impostor of an idiot boy, who had evidently wandered into the cave and had found and copied the Indian writing on the stone. And Gilda was beginning to talk of "poor Cobos!" If that matter were brought up now what might not happen? It had taken him five years' absence, and superhuman courage and patience, to have his version of events accepted, even though Gilda's father and mother were dead at the time, and there would be no one who could confidently dispute his authority among the underlings on the Hacienda. All the business of the succession duties had been accomplished before that fortunate journey through the Andes, and the long absence and the supposed illness were quite enough to account for the startling change in the appearance of Carlos Edmondson when he at last revisited his home. A trouble of the eyes entailed the use of smoked glasses for years, and the face which had gone away smooth and rosy returned half-buried in a thick black beard. Transito had, indeed, turned pale and crossed herself when she saw him, but she was soon persuaded that the extraordinary climate in which Don Carlito had been obliged to live might reasonably be expected to work great changes in a man's looks.

If Gilda would not hear reason, stronger measures must be taken. And Anton must be put away in an asylum; he really was becoming too troublesome. Transito would be glad to have him off her hands. Meanwhile his wanderings must be stopped.

All these *contretemps* had taken the edge

off the triumph of his discovery last night, and now, when he thought of it, he seemed to see everywhere Gilda, nothing but Gilda, with her questioning eyes and her grave, fresh face, standing between him and the treasure which at last lay within reach. As he mused, another face seemed to be looking at him over her shoulder, a boy's face, with the same clear eyes and proud features, but white, deathly white, with a black hole in the brow. It did not often come between him and his aims, but when it did, the man shivered and hid his eyes, and rushed away to escape from it.

When Transito knew that the Señor Don Capitan, as she called Reggie, was gone, and saw that Gilda had shut herself into her room alone, she cast about for some means of bringing comfort to the poor Señorita in the absence of her lover. In Transito's mind comfort generally took the form of an extra meal; so she prepared a cup of chocolate such as only she knew how to make, chocolate that had the aroma of coffee and bay leaves and vanilla, and stiff froth of cream two inches thick on the top. Cakes of the consistency of wedding-cake icing accompanied this nice but unwholesome draught, and were daintily arranged beside it, and then Transito brought her offering to Gilda's door, and knocked timidly when she found it locked.

In a moment Gilda came to open it, and there were traces of tears, many and recent, on her cheeks. Transito was full of sympathy at once, and wanted to know all about it, for in her country mistress and maid are more confidential than with us.

Gilda thanked her for the chocolate and pretended to sip it so as not to have to answer questions.

"You lie down, mi linda," said the woman, "here on the sofa, and I will hold the tray for you. Of course you are sad now that your betrothed is gone, but it will only be for a day or two, and then you will see his handsome face again!"

"I was not crying about the Señor Capitan," Gilda answered, smiling at the idea of shedding floods of tears because the only man in the world had to leave her for a day's business. "I never cry. But really it *is* sad to come back and find so many changes. Father and mother gone, and my brother so changed—so different! But you are the same, Transito," she added, smiling at the anxious faithful face looking up into hers. Transito had found a seat on the floor beside Gilda's sofa. She shook her hand mournfully as the girl spoke.

"You may indeed say there have been changes," she replied. "Sometimes I wonder if I am I any longer!" She lowered her voice, "I am the only one left of the indoor servants, and Don Carlito would have sent me away too, but that your blessed papa had put it in his will that I was to live here always."

"Why did my brother send everybody away?" asked Gilda wonderingly.

"Who knows, Señorita? Gentlemen have strange fancies. When he came back from San Salvador there was no one in the house who had known him but I. And I—Santo Dios—what a fright he gave me! He looked like the poor Intendente who had been killed in the Andes! Our handsome Carlito had grown old and sad—and that beard changed him so much!"

"I should not have recognised him," Gilda replied. "He must have been very ill after that journey through the Andes. Why did they go?"

"There was no railway then," said Transito, "and they wanted to choose some Argentine cattle. Those which are driven over the passes are skin and bone when they get here. And the Intendente had been before, and told Don Carlito that it was safe if one were careful, and that there were many strange things to see, and the young master was wild to go, and then he saw the Intendente fall over the precipice, and it almost killed him. He never came back here, but went up to Bogotá, and sent this man, who changed all the servants and made himself like a master till Don Carlito came back at last. But his youth went over the rocks with the man who was killed, and I have never heard him laugh since."

Gilda was silent, pondering over the strange tale. Then there was a sharp scream in the patio, and she and Transito rushed to the door together in time to see Carlos strike Anton twice with a heavy cane which broke at the second blow. Ernie was trying to defend his friend, attacking the big man with two sharp little fists. As Gilda rushed forward to rescue Anton, Carlos turned and walked away, leaving the indignant women

protesting, Anton hiding himself in his mother's arms, and Ernie volubly explaining to Gilda that the victim had done nothing at all, but had just looked at Carlos as he went by.

"Your Mr. Edmondson is bad and cross and black," cried the fierce little boy, "and when I'm big enough, I'll kill him!"

VIII

Reggie McCalmont had a long, solitary drive to Santiago. As the dusty road with its lines of poplars flashed by in endless regularity, he was thinking of many things, and first of all, of his own and Gilda's future.

The girl had not been mistaken when she said that Reggie had something on his mind. It was not anything that could touch his affection for her, which had taken a strong hold on his fresh and honest nature. He had met her at exactly the right moment, when a long illness had made a pause between one set of interests and another, when he needed sympathy and friendliness, and had had both and a thousand times more from grey-eyed Gilda, with her warm heart, never ashamed of its own womanliness, and her clear head, and that sane old fighting instinct to give strength to her girlish nature—to make it impossible for her to see a wrong and not strive to right it. No, Reggie had not changed his mind about her, as she had for a minute pretended to imagine. On the contrary, every day passed in her sweet breezy atmosphere, drew him to her more closely, made the early days of his love for her pale and fade before the deep trust and sympathy that he felt towards her now. He remembered, wonderingly, that in those first days she had not seemed to him strikingly beautiful, only graceful, "sympathique," mystically charming, as a man had a right to expect that all his women friends should be. Now—she had no attributes that he stopped to think about any longer—she was simply his Gilda, so much a part of himself that her faults and mistakes could be discussed and taken into consideration as if they had been his own.

But, seeing how she clung to the country of her birth and how obstinate she could be about what she loved, Reggie began to foresee a little cloud of trouble which might greatly shadow their future life. The Hacienda was all very well for a few weeks in the summer time, but to live there always, as Gilda declared that she intended to do—to him this would be moral death, and not all his love for her could induce him to contemplate the life for a moment. How could such a girl as she, clever, and appreciative, and warm-hearted, propose to a modern Englishman to give up his career, his friends, his marches and scrambles and fights in the forefront of England's honour—to settle down into a subordinate place beside that horrible Carlos on a lonely farm in the Andes? To wear flannels and eat casuela and read dirty Chilean newspapers two days old, for the rest of his life? No woman who ever lived had a right to ask such a sacrifice as that! He could not do it. There would be no use in his promising to try. He was getting wildly homesick for London already, and, though he had never loved anything in this world as he loved Gilda, yet he would have to leave her and go broken-hearted all his days if he must pay this price to call her his.

One reason of his coming down to Santiago had been the craving to speak to an Englishman, to see some home papers, to assure himself that he was not already buried for good in that high green valley beyond miles and miles of dusty plains—and this after only a fortnight of life at the Hacienda! What would it be after months and years? He could hardly wonder that Carlos Edmondson had relapsed into gloomy, morose ways. Poor wretch, he had had to live there alone. What an existence!

Musing and a little troubled, Reggie drew nearer to the capital, and noticed far more people in the roads than he had seen when he had driven out to the hills two weeks before. They seemed to be bringing all manner of wares to the town, fruit and vegetables, cakes and toys, enormous bundles of brown seagrowths meant to be used for food, pigs and chickens, even the family baby and the family cat were brought, safely tied into the same rude cradle—evidently a serious migration was going on.

"What is it?" Reggie asked of the driver.

"The Christmas Fair," replied the man proudly. "You are fortunate, Señor, you

will be able to see it all," and he sighed, for he himself was to return to the Hacienda at once.

Then Reggie realised that Christmas is a midsummer feast in Chile, and also reproached himself with having come away from Gilda and Ernie, who would have but a dreary Christmas without him. He would only stay a day in Santiago and hurry back to them as soon as he had heard the news from home.

His cousin, a lieutenant from the flagship, was to meet him at an hotel on the Alameda, and thither Reggie drove, with some difficulty. The long double avenue of elms was crowded from end to end with booths and tents, drinking stalls and dancing places, for this was the time when the country folk from far and near had a right to set up their tabernacles wherever they liked, for three days. At the end of that time those who were quite unconscious from drink were tumbled into the carts with the mattresses and the guitar, the baby, and the other unsold wares, and those who could still walk upright went along beside them, touching up the lean bullocks and roaring out strange songs as they went. When Reggie arrived they were just getting their queer camps ready for the three days' orgie, and the sounds of hammering and quarrelling over the best places had not yet given way to the music and dancing which would begin a few hours later.

Reggie found his cousin waiting for him in the courtyard of the hotel. Ted Brownlow was a sunburnt, clean-shaven man, with a pleasant smile, a very English voice, and a pair of keen sailor eyes, which just now looked amused and puzzled.

"Queerest place I ever saw in my life," he said when he and Reggie had shaken hand. "What do you make of it, old man?"

"Squalor," said the other in tones of disgust. "Just fancy a town council allowing that sort of thing—at midsummer—with cholera behind the hills already!"

He pointed to the back of a large booth which had been set up directly in front of the hotel door. An enormous cask of "aguardiente" was already on tap, and the raw smell of the spirit reached their nostrils where they stood, while a phalanx of green water-melons was piled under the counter.

"I am glad I am not going to stop here long," said the naval man, laughing. "You had better come down with me to Valparaiso, Reggie, and I will take you on board the flagship. This isn't the country for a man who has been ill, like you! What are you stopping for?"

"That is a long story," said Reggie; but soon he told his cousin the outline of his situation, and was properly congratulated on his engagement.

"It seems to me that you are doing yourself very well," observed Brownlow smiling; "but you don't look as happy as you ought! Nice girl, awfully fond of you, of course—plenty of money I suppose—what is the matter?"

"She wants to live—in Chile!" Reggie replied with a groan; "everything is the matter!"

Ned laughed heartily. "Is that all?" he said. "That taste will cure itself very soon, I should think! She has been brought up in England, you say? In another month she will be down on her knees to you to take her back!"

"Come up and be introduced to her," said the afflicted lover, brightening up; "perhaps you will put it so that she will understand! She is simply the dearest girl in the whole world—but I can't do it, even for her!"

"I should like to come very much," said Brownlow; "I think I can make it right about my leave. But I must stay here today; there's an opera company or something, and I must see the show. We have been six months in the most forlorn places; Alaska quite the most giddy gay of the lot, and I hanker after civilisation!"

"You had better get it, then," Reggie answered. "I can put in to morrow here all right, and we will drive up on Thursday. I will write and tell them we are coming. Now come out; we ought to see this savage fair since we are here."

They passed that day in wandering about, buying strange things and looking at strange faces, and in the evening heard some fairly good music at the opera. The next morning Reggie would have started for the Hacienda, but Brownlow begged so pitifully for one day more of what he called "civilisation" that his cousin had not the heart to refuse.

Towards evening they left the hotel and

strolled down the middle avenue of the Alameda, transformed from a dignified boulevard into a scene of the wildest revelling, which in a few hours would have become shameless debauchery. The day was falling, and flaming torches had been lighted all down the sides of the road; their fitful flare fell on packed crowds of dark faces—Indians in their strange dress, fringed and beaded like the wrappings taken from Peruvian tombs; "Huaso" cattle drivers in all the glory of striped ponchos flying on the wind, felt hats a yard in diameter, silver belts and silver spurs whose rowels measured ten inches across, and rang like a peal of bells at every step. The huge disc made an enormously high heel necessary, and the men looked quite gigantic in the dim light. Rings, many rows deep, were formed outside the favourite dancing places, where every man paid a centavo for his turn of "samacueca" with one of the gaily dressed girls who stood each in her place, ready to whirl round and round in a wild spinning dance with each new customer.

Reggie and his cousin edged through to the front of a crowd which was pressing close and with approving shouts round a spot where a tinkle of many guitars showed that much dancing was going on. The people were good-tempered as yet, and made way for the tall Englishmen, who soon found themselves outside a great chalk-traced circle where a girl, dark as an Indian, with blazing eyes, gold earrings, and flying yellow skirts, was whirling in a quick rattling step round and round, from side to side, swaying almost into the arms of her eager partner, and then darting away to another point of the circle, whither he followed her in vain. A scarlet handkerchief in her right hand waved and snapped before his eyes, blinded and misled him as the matadores seek to madden a bull, and every time that she had escaped him a leap in the air and a crack of the castañetás marked her triumph.

The man who pursued her with quick bounds and sudden cries had long outdanced his time and the value of the coin which he had paid, but the madness of the samacueca was on both man and maid, and they would not stop, nor would the guitar-players cease their tinkling, for all were carried away by the excitement of the dancers.

Only the master of the booth, a blue-eyed, red-haired man, who looked as if he must have come over the hills from the Irish settlement in Monte Video, called out angrily to the girl to stop, and when she would not, cursed her first in Spanish, and then in broad Saxon, so that Reggie and Ted turned and gazed at him in amazement. Then Reggie strode up to the rough counter, and put a paper dollar into the man's hand.

"Let her dance," he said; "there's a dollar for your English swear! Where did you learn it?"

"Where you did, Señor Gringo!* My name is Juan Jones, and I am as English as you are," replied the man, pocketing the note and his bad temper together. "Will you try my chicha? It's the best of the drinks after all!"

He rinsed two glasses in honour of his countrymen, and filled them with the sweet must. Reggie drank it to please him, and found it cool and fragrant. Meanwhile the samacueca was whirling madly in the little space, the crowd shouted its approval, and far above the lurid noisy throng a few stars showed through the branches of the tall trees.

As the two young men stood by the rude counter, one man and another came to get a drink, and the space in which the dance went forward grew smaller and smaller. There were growls among the crowd. A tall Huaso, with jingling spurs, threw his coin to the owner across the other men's heads, and breaking in between the two dancers, suddenly lifted the lad high over his head, and flung him against the spectators, while he took his place, and in an instant was whirling round the space, poncho flying, spurs rattling, after the fleet girl, who never ceased or altered her step for a moment. But his rough action had broken the restraint of the onlookers, and a hoarse cry went from mouth to mouth, for many had been waiting for their turn, the men were far from sober, and the Huaso dandy was a new-comer. The boy whom he had ousted picked himself up, and slipped his hand inside his shirt for his knife, the circle swayed once, twice, and then broke in and overwhelmed the dancers, screaming, pushing, wild with drink and the joy of a fight.

* The civilian nickname for the English.

The spot which had been a clear space was now a mass of struggling men and women, and a dozen knives flashed out in the torchlight. The poor girl who had caused the tumult was nowhere to be seen. Her master leapt the counter at a bound, and tried to force his way into the throng to rescue her. He found his arm caught as he was hitting out wildly, and then saw that his two countrymen were before him. Reggie turned and said over his shoulder: "We will get her out; don't let them close in behind."

Then the three worked in like a wedge through the seething mass, and the old English blow from the shoulder told as it always does on a wild, scratching, half-breed crowd. Those nearest shrank back a little, a knife came flying through the air, and fell on Reggie's knuckles, and I am sorry to say that he immediately saw red, and knew nothing more till he and his two supporters found themselves alone in a clear space cumbered with more than one fallen foe. The girl, Manuela, had fainted, and lay in a pitiful heap at their feet, and the crowd had completely melted away in terror of being implicated in the disturbance. Of course there was not a policeman to be seen.

The three men picked the poor dancer up, and carried her under the rough shelter of the shed, where the two old guitar women were shrieking and wringing their hands. Manuela soon came to herself enough to drink a little aguardiente and sit up, though she seemed to be shaken and terrified still. No great harm had been done, beyond a bruise on her arm and some sad rents in her best frock. But the man Jones bewailed his luck most bitterly. He could still sell his drinks, and in the indiscriminate crowd which poured along, perhaps his booth, which had happily escaped ruin, might not attract the attention of the police; but if Manuelita could not dance again it would be a loss, a great loss—at least twenty pesos in the three days—and then he began to scold her for stupidly causing the affray.

"Leave her alone," said Reggie; "let her go home, poor thing! She might have been killed in that scrimmage."

"So she might," said the red-haired man, "and I am very much obliged to you gentlemen for helping me to get her out. I don't know where we should have been without you, I don't indeed!"

"Oh, well, I'm glad we were there," said Reggie, twisting a pocket-handkerchief round his knuckles, which were bleeding freely.

"Hullo," said his cousin, "let me tie that up for you," and he deftly bound up the injured hand. Mr. Jones seemed much impressed, and sheepishly held out his palm with something in it, towards Reggie.

"Please take it, sir," he said, "though in course I couldn't be making a present to a gentleman like you, still I wish you'd take it, just from one that ought to be an Englishman too, and that's most uncommon grateful for what you done just now."

"We didn't do anything particular, my man," said Reggie. "There, good-night, and don't let that poor child dance any more."

But Juan Jones came after him still holding out his palm with a ring lying on it. "Please take it sir," he pleaded, "you'll make me proud and 'appy if you do. It came to me by chance off the 'and of a poor gentleman as I found killed in the Cordillera. I'd be glad for you to 'ave it."

"All right, Mr. Jones," said Reggie, who saw that the man was in earnest, "of course I'll take it. Wait a minute."

Then he turned and spoke to his cousin, thrusting some notes into his hand.

"Run back, Ted," he whispered, "and give these to the girl while I talk to him."

When Ted returned he found Reggie saying good-night to his new friend.

"Good-night, sir," said Juan Jones, "and good-night to you too, sir!"—this to Ted. "Lord! ain't it good to hear a word of English now and again!"

And while the two young men walked home he went back to Manuelita and the chicha stall. The vanquished in the recent fight picked themselves up and had some more chicha to set them right. Manuelita hid her twenty dollars in her bodice, mended her torn skirt, tossed off another glass of spirits and began to dance again. In half an hour the trouble was quite forgotten and business was as brisk as ever.

"Queer experience," Reggie remarked to his cousin as they once more stood under the doorway of the hotel. "I wonder where on earth Juan Jones came from!"

"Off one of the ships," replied Ted. "That was a sea oath, and his arms were all blue anchors. We have no end of trouble on these coasts; they have regular agents to persuade the men to desert."

"He did not seem very pleased to see you, now I come to think of it," said Reggie, trying to light a cigarette in the draught.

Ted laughed. "I'm not all blue anchors, am I?" he asked. "How could he know who I was?"

"You've got Flag Lieutenant written all over you though!" Reggie replied. "One never sees your eyes and your upper lip out of the navy. They made you like that on purpose, of course!"

"Rot!" said Ted gravely. "We are the only people who shave clean in these degenerate days, that's why! Let's see the ring that scoundrel made you take."

Reggie held it out on the palm of his uninjured hand, and they came closer under the light. It was a heavy seal ring of an old-fashioned pattern, the stone a good deal knocked about by rough usage, but the crest on it still clear, a lion holding a flaming cross.

"That's English enough, anyway," said Ted Brownlow. "I wonder who the poor beggar was."

"There's writing inside," said Reggie, "I can see 'Father.'" And he turned the gold so that the light should fall on the inner surface. Then he looked up at his cousin with startled eyes.

"This is an odd thing," he said; "the name is Edmondson, 'Carlos Edmondson from his Father.'"

"That's the name of your *fiancée*, isn't it?" Ted answered.

"It's the name of her brother, the man we are staying with," returned the other, looking grave. "How should that Jones man have found it in the hills, where he says he did?"

"Some friend perhaps," Ted suggested, "had it as a present from Edmondson. Aren't there any more of the name in the country?"

"Not one," said Reggie, "Gilda told me so."

"Queer," mused Ted; "better take it up and show it to them. You may be sure it was given away, or perhaps stolen, and your red-haired friend is lying—just what one would expect of a deserting hound," he added with fine official contempt.

"I shall go and talk to him again," Reggie declared. "I suppose he will be somewhere about in the morning. I don't believe he was lying."

"You'll only get more," laughed Brownlow. "Those fellows will yarn away as long as they can find anybody to listen. I am going to turn in."

Reggie could not sleep, but wandered up and down his room, bathing his hand, which hurt him a good deal, and again and again holding up the curious ring to the gaslight. He felt as if he were wound in cobwebs, and his mind raged at not being able to see beyond them. Everything connected with the Hacienda seemed unreal, fleeting, except Gilda herself, and he thanked God for her sweet flesh-and-blood reality. But that impossible Carlos, whose ring had been taken off a dead man's finger by a runaway sailor in the Andes—Carlos, who seemed to look upon his sister and her betrothed as his natural enemies—Reggie disliked him more than he had ever disliked any one in his life. He seemed an alien, no relation at all to his darling of a sister. Here Reggie found his imagination running away with him, so he soberly put out the light and turned in for a few hours of troubled sleep, broken and coloured by the harsh music, the cries and guitars and songs of the throng which surged up and down the street beneath his windows.

IX

THE Alameda had been picturesque at night with its flaring torches lighting up the dark faces and brilliant dresses of the crowd, but it would be hard to imagine a more forlorn or revolting spectacle than it presented in the grey dawn of Christmas morning, when Reggie rose and looked out into the street. From his window he could see some way down one of the side avenues, on which the gay booths turned their backs, and where broken casks and empty bottles, melon rinds and victims of drink lay prone together under the sober light of early day. The bells were ringing indeed, and many ladies, hooded deep in their black "Mantos," were picking their way in fear and haste close to the walls of

the houses, to get to early Mass at the parish church.

Even at that early hour the heat was intense, and Reggie McCalmont quickly closed his window to exclude the indescribable smells which hung on the air. He had resolved to go out and find his man of the night before, and see if he could not extract from him a little more information. It was to be hoped that Mr. Jones, at any rate, had not quite succumbed to the potency of his own chicha.

What was the young Englishman's amazement on reaching Mr. Jones's place of business, to find that, except for the change of light and a certain sodden tint on all the faces, last night's entertainment was still going on, Manuelita still dancing—a trifle less lightly—round her chalked circle, while one young Huaso after another stepped forward, danced his dance, and made way for the next, with the regularity of soldiers at drill! Manuelita looked frightfully fagged, poor girl, and her voice was hoarse and broken, but all her pride went to keep her tired limbs moving; she had, though Reggie knew it not, the reputation of being the best dancer of the district, and she would not give in till every other girl in the long line of booths had dropped down in defeat. Everybody who could stand up at all seemed to be quite wide awake, and the buying and selling, drinking and dancing was going on all along the Alameda as if it had only just begun.

Tired as Manuelita was, she found a bright smile for her benefactor of the night before, and waved her hand to him to come and dance too; but Reggie nodded to her and slipped round to the back of the stall, where the master, seated on a bucket upside down, was indulging in a sober cup of maté with one of the guitar women who had been making it in an iron pot on three stones against a cask.

"Well," said Juan Jones, looking a trifle uneasy, "what brings you out so early, sir? Have a 'matesito con leche'? Fine thing in the morning!"

Reggie saw that he seemed suspicious and at once set his mind at rest. It was not his business to run down deserting sailors.

"I don't want any maté," he said, "only a story that you had not time to tell me last night."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Jones, looking puzzled and falling back into the old habit of obedience to a gentleman.

"Would you mind telling me about where you found that ring you gave me? See, I am wearing it. It looks like an old one."

With some repugnance Reggie had slipped the dead man's ring on his own finger. He thought that Jones would be more inclined to talk if he saw that his gift was appreciated.

"I don't mind telling you all I know," said Jones, glancing at him sharply. "I say, though, you ain't no blooming naval orficer, are you?"

"No, I'm not," said Reggie looking him straight in the eyes, "and if I were, what is that to you?"

"Oh nothing," said the man, "only I'd rather oblige you if you wasn't, that's all. Yes, I'll tell you where I got that ring."

Here he pulled a cigarette from behind his ear, but gladly took a Carovopoulo which Reggie offered him. The solemnities of lighting having been gone through, he sent the old guitar player round to the front, to relieve her colleague, and began:

"It isn't a long story, nor it isn't much of a story. I'd been cattle herding down in the Argentine for a close-fisted Jew Dago, who paid me ten dollars a month, and made me pay him twelve for nasty stores I didn't want. Three years I'd been there, and very sick I were of it. And one day he says to me, 'Juan, you dirty Gringo, drive that upland herd into the corral to-morrow; there's some more of your sort coming over from the bad country to buy beasts.' They call Chile the bad country in the Argentine, and in Chile they call the Argentine —hell. Well, I up and drove the beasts where I was told, and a hard job I had of it, 'cos 'twasn't their time of year to be drove, and no more they wasn't accustomed to going double shuffles twenty miles into corral, so they was pretty beat when they got there. And the next morning the gentlemen came down to choose heads. One of them he were a stout man, uncommon black for a Gringo, and not as affable as he might have been, seeing he seemed to be a kind of head servant to the other gentleman, him that had the English name wot's inside the ring, poor lad."

Here Reggie threw away his cigarette and sat up as if something had stung him.

"Yes," said Jones nodding his head, "only one of them was a Gringo, and that was the young one, a nice-spoken gentleman as ever I saw. 'You should be English by the looks of you,' he said to me at the gate of the corral; 'you ought to come over into Chile, we want good men like you to work the country for us.' Then the other man comes shovin' in between, and he says, 'Get to your work, you cursed mestizo, tail 'em out for us to see!' He called me mestizo, but I says to myself, 'It's you might be a half Indian with that dirty black skin and your white eyes.' However I tailed out the beasts with another man helping me, and they chose fifty, lean but strong, and all sound and clean. The big man were a thundering good judge of cattle—I never saw a better. And they stopped that night at the estacion, and the next morning they pays the money down to my master and away we starts for the Andes, me driving the herd, and a couple of Indian boys to help me, and my two gentlemen ridin' ahead, to keep out of the tramplin' and the dust. But they wasn't far ahead, and I was looking at their harness more than once that first day—might I have another of them cigarritos, sir?—first rate they are."

He took two this time, put one behind his ear, lighted the other and went on. "As I was saying, I took particular notice of two things. One was that the big man had a remarkable big and heavy chicote hangin' on his white bridle."

"What on earth is a chicote?" interrupted his hearer.

"Law, you must be raw to our ways if you don't know that," Juan replied. "A chicote's a plaited thong, a yard long, of raw hide, with a topping big slug of lead in the end. You uses it for the 'orses out 'ere, but the Huasos like it for fighting—kills a man at one blow. Well, Mr. Bailiff, or whatever he were, he had one pretty near as big as a 'cherimoyo,'" here Juan pointed to one of the lumpy custard apples on his stall, "and the young gentleman had none; and the other thing I noticed was that wherever he rode for them first two days—it's three days to the top of the pass—the young gentleman was always ridin' along kind of careless like on the outer edge, and the big man were huggin' the rock inside, and just a foot or two behind, and I says to myself, if that young gentleman's horse weren't quite steady now, he'd begin to let fly at that other animal be'ind him, and somebody'd be over the edge in less than no time. Them passes is awful, sir, two foot of scratchy path, and straight walls aloft and sudden death below. There's pieces where a man has to send runners on for ten miles to turn people back if he's goin' to drive cattle by, and many a good man has come to his end for not minding them!"

"Go on, please," said Reggie huskily.

"Well, the third day come and we was gettin' very high among the hills, and I'd lost sight of the gentlemen, cos I were told to keep back a bit; the gentleman, 'e didn't like the beasts so near. So I kept back, and then, somehow, I didn't like it, seein' what I seen the two days before; and the road that bad too. So I leaves the Indians to come on with the cattle, and I rides on just to lend a 'and if anything should come of the gentleman's careless ridin', which I'd spoke to him about it twice, telling him it were a temptin' Providence to go with a loose rein on that awful outer edge. An' he only laughed at me, poor lad, 'e'd never been in such places before an' 'e dunnow what fear were. And as I comes round a corner sharp and sudden, what do I see ahead but the worst drop in all the Andes, two thousand feet it must have been, and the two horses crawlin' along nose to tail same as before, the big man in and the young one out, on three hundred yards of path scratched in the face of the rock, so narrer you couldn't spread your handkercher out on it. An' just as I was thinkin' if 'twas safer to shout for them to get off and walk, or safer to leave 'em to Providence and the nags' feet (for they dursen't look back an' they'd not seen me) I sees the big man lean forward and whirl that chicote once round his head and bring it down on the quarters of the other man's horse, an' then as the critter reared an' staggered, didn't the brute let fly at the length an' catch the young gentleman one on the temple! Down they goes man and horse all in a whirl with a scruntling of rocks and a 'ammering of 'oofs that were awful to 'ear, an' the boy gave a scream that would have split Aconcagua. I've seen a mort of things bad an' good, but I never seen nothin' like that, and I hope I never shall again."

"What did you do?" asked Reggie in that same husky voice, covering his eyes with his hand.

"I 'adn't no pistol," said Juan, "or I'd 'a shot him where he stood, and the next best thing were to watch what the beast would do. I knowed 'twould be no use goin' down after the lad, he were dead long before he got to the bottom, for sure. So I drew back a bit, an' I watched, an' my man got down off his 'orse, very slow and cautious and just looked over the edge, and it seemed to make him sick, for he leant back agin the rock and shut his eyes. Then in a minute he looks all round to see if nobody 'd seen him, and then he walks along the rest of the way, his horse following most reasonable as the pore things will do if you leave 'em alone. And in a few minutes he turns the corner, lookin' back once, his ugly face wet and blue in the sun, an' I seen the whites of his eyes rollin' an' then he goes off out o' sight, an' I says to myself, 'I think we can catch him, Jack, my son, easy over this 'ere to'gallant yard,' and then I sees one o' them awful condores wheelin' and wheelin' over the place where them two was gone down, a reg'lar black slide between the rocks, and I says to myself, s'posin' that boy ain't dead after all, an' s'posin' he be, is this filthy beast of a condor to pick him to pieces as if he were a crippled steer? No, says I, he's an Englishman same as I was once, an' 'e shall have decent burial if such is to be got anywheres to call handy, if I stay down there with him. So I backs to my men an' I calls the youngest to climb down with me, while t'other waited with the cattle in a safe place. And what wi' lassoos, an' what wi' hands and feet an' teeth too sometimes—well, we found 'im. Had enough, sir? 'Taint what I call a pleasing tale."

"No; go on," was all that Reggie could say. Then he slipped off the ring and held it in his hand, while Juan told the rest with less fluency than he had used before, and various puffs at the cigarette between his periods.

"Well, yes, we found him, not much knocked about after all, for he had fallen clear of the 'orse, and there was only the mark of the chicote on his head, though his leg was broken, and he'd fallen between two rocks that was holdin' him exactly like a cradle, with his face to the sky, which it looked powerful far up from that cleft under the world. There was a drip of water out of a rock, and I washed his face and tried to put brandy between his teeth, but lor', he were dead an hour before I got to him. Me and the Indian—(and no white couldn't have stood by me better, he's my head driver now)—we got him out of the cleft, and I saw seven condors where there'd been one. And so we found a hole in the rocks, and we cleaned it out beautiful and put in a stone for 'is 'ead, and we lay him down quite comfortable and quiet. An' I took the ring, not to rob the poor lad, but 'cos it did seem blamed foolishness to leave it there. An' I took a nice silk handkercher out of 'is pocket and lays it over 'is face. I remember his name were worked in red, and I says, 'Now, Cucho'—that were the Indian—'we'll 'ave a prayer, same as they does at sea.' But for all I tried I couldn't remember no prayers; it were so many years I 'adn't done no church parade, not having expected to do chaplain's work, you see, so I only says, 'Lord, have mercy,' which sounded uncommon like a swear, but 'twern't meant so. And then we gets a big stone and fits it in as tight as ever we can, for a kind of door, and we puts a lot of others agin it, so 's no jaguars nor leones nor condors couldn't get in if they tried for a month. And then—well, 'twas gettin' pretty late, and we had all we could do to get back to camp and cattle for the night, but I were glad I done it. There's one poor chap I given decent burial to, anyway."

"Shake hands," said Reggie, and the deserter's hand met the officer's in a friendly grip.

"What happened afterwards?" asked McCalmont.

"Well," said Jones, "there was no getting any forrarder that night, so I stopped where I were, with the beasts and the Indians, till morning, and then we went on quick an' careful; but—this is the queerest part of the story—I never sighted that white-eyed villain again! The boys we met told us they'd seen him ridin' away as hard as the ground would let him, and when we come to the top of the pass, where there's a kind of tienda place you can get a meal at, an' the drovers generally brings up for a day, they said he'd been and gone, not stopped 'alf an' hour an' off again, with his 'orse regular played out,

but he didn't seem to care so as he could get down. Well, I didn't stop neither, not more'n an hour or two, and on we goes after him. But I never set eyes on him, not I! He were scared I might ha' seen somethin', I suppose."

"Didn't you tell the police what you had seen?" Reggie inquired.

"Well, no, sir, I didn't," Jones replied, rubbing his chin. "First place me and the 'serenos' we hadn't no particular call to be intimate, an' I generally give 'em a wide berth. Second place, there was the cattle. Now fifty 'ead of sound cattle, it was millions to a poor chap like me, an', says I to myself, if I give 'em up some scamp of a Chileno 'll say they're Government property, and sell 'em for himself. The poor gentleman they belongs to 's dead and buried quiet on the East Slope, and that murderer's afraid to ask for 'em. Jack, my son, this is your almighty chanst come at last. So I sells 'arf an' I keeps 'arf, an' I buys a bit o' land; an', man, I prospered. There's a 'undred in the fields where I started with five and twenty, an' I 'ave my own corral an' my own peones, an' I never been asked a question, an' I don't believe Providence grudges me my luck!"

"I don't believe it does," said Reggie McCalmont. "I am glad you have told me the story, and I must ask you not to move from here without letting me know. I shall have to see you again later in the day."

"I'll be 'ere till to-morrow morning, sir, and then they'll turn me out whether or no. But I say, sir"—he paused, looking very much troubled—"you ain't the sort of gentleman to go and give a chap away—a poor man what told you a nice little story confidential—are you, now?"

"Don't be afraid," said Reggie. "If you are wanted, Mr. Jones, it will be quite as much for your own good as for that of anybody else."

Reggie looked very serious, but there was no mistaking the glance of his eyes, the ring of his voice.

"All right, sir," said the strange red-haired man. "I trust myself to you. I knows a gentleman when I sees one, though I 'ave been ten years in South Ameriky."

X.

So Gilda had better reason than she thought for the dread and repulsion with which the man Carlos inspired her. But for the accident of an identical Christian name he had nothing in common with the brother she had loved, with the youth whom he had murdered and fled from in the Andes all those years ago. Young Edmondson's trust in Cobos, his lonely position after his English father and Spanish mother had both died (leaving to him, since he was already of age, the chief management of his own and his little sister's estates), his blind confidence in the shrewd Intendente who had served his father so well, all prepared the way for the final crime and the final tragedy. When Cobos pushed him off the rock ledge into Eternity, his own plan was elaborate and mature. He had possessed himself of all the family correspondence, had copied young Carlos' signature till it was as familiar to him as his own, had induced him to give all his papers into his keeping, including his private cheque-book, which the Intendente offered to carry for safety's sake during the rough journey, and when the end came he had only one thing to fear, the Gringo drover who must accompany the cattle. From him he rode as if for his life as soon as the deed was done, judging rightly that the man would not take much trouble to seek him out merely to restore a herd of prime cattle which would otherwise be abandoned to him.

The letters which he sent both to the family lawyer and to the man left in charge of the Hacienda de San Miguel had been perfectly clear and satisfactory. He gave a short account of the Intendente's misfortune—such accidents were frequent in the dangerous passes of the Andes—and said that the shock had been so great that he could not make up his mind to return home at present. Then news came that he was ill, and had to go to the heights of San Salvador de Bogotà, a favourite health resort, for his lungs, and while he was still there a new Intendente, procured through the lawyers, was sent to take over the estate, with secret instructions to weed out a long list of servants and tenants who were described as unsatisfactory, but whose real crime was that they had known poor young Carlos too well.

Familiar as he was with every detail of the place, it was not difficult for the other Carlos to administer it by correspondence from his eyrie in Bogotà, where he stayed five long years, waiting patiently till it might be safe to present himself again in Chile. There had been some slight resemblance of profile between him and his unhappy employer, and this, helped out by a heavy growth of beard, smoked glasses, supposed illness and the effect of time, would account for the change in Carlos Edmondson's appearance should he meet any old acquaintances. As a matter of fact he managed to keep carefully out of their way, and but for the impression made on Transito, excited a little surprise but no suspicion among the half-Indian rustics on the estate. Young Edmondson had been little in Santiago, and the man who personated him could go and come there freely, making such friends as he thought might be useful to him. At the Hacienda he was still careful, leaving most of the practical details to the excellent man who had replaced him, and only going out towards evening when the people were gathered in their homesteads. Gilda had always been a perplexity and a difficulty; the real danger in the whole position came from her. No wonder that his letters to her had been short and rare, no wonder that her wish to return had been persistently thwarted, and that she had met with a sorry welcome when she at last took the law into her own hands and came uninvited.

He had gone to meet her, sick with fear, and when he found himself still safe, the fear had taken another form, for her brother seemed to be looking at him from her eyes, speaking to him in her clear English voice. He had learnt to speak English with extreme care, but his accent was thick and guttural and he feared that it would betray him. Fortunately for him Gilda was dazzled and thrown off her guard by a storm of new impressions just then, and his Spanish-English had been accepted among the rest. How he had hoped that her steamer would go to the bottom before it reached Valparaiso! That slight accident, he told himself, might just as well have been a serious one. But no, she had come, she had acknowledged him as her brother, and here she was, all on the alert to convict him of mismanagement, and quite impervious to his generous offer to buy her out at his own valuation. He had killed Carlos for the sake of the land as it stood then. Now that he knew its true value, the possible millions that might be extracted from it, this girl suddenly stood up and claimed her rights. It was not likely that she could be persuaded to ride alone with him, through dangerous places where a false step would account for everything. No, other methods must be tried with Gilda. Perhaps he could make Reggie, as they called him, hear reason, marry her out of hand, and take her away on the promise of a decent little income, paid regularly in England. If that failed—Carlos did not put his further intentions into words, and as it turned out, circumstances hastened him to conclusions which could only produce one result.

In these still lengthening days he wanted to follow up the indications which he had discovered in the cave, but with two irresponsible beings like Gilda and Ernie hanging about to watch his movements, to say nothing of the imp Anton, always ready for mischief, he did not like to stay long away from the house. They might break into his attic and get at his specimens or his papers. No, he would do no more exploring till Gilda was gone and he had also got the Niño-puma safely out of the way. With Gilda there it was useless to try to remove him, for she was interested in the boy and Transito would fly to her in tears, and there would be endless reproaches. What futile, unneeded things women and children were!

As a matter of fact Gilda might have seen all Carlos' specimens without being in the least excited by the sight. To him, completely absorbed in his mastering idea, it seemed that every one else must be inspired by the same wildly covetous hopes and expectations, whereas Gilda would have looked upon his stones as mere curiosities, and his gold-mines, real or fanciful, as quite secondary in interest to the new Alderney with the beautiful dun skin, or even the great field of red "alfalfa" where the pretty creature browsed. Money is not a thrilling subject to young people who have always had everything they want. Gilda distinctly objected to being poorer than she had been all her life, but she had no desire for great added riches either.

The day of Reggie's departure went somewhat heavily for Gilda, marked as it was by her disagreeable interview with Carlos, who shut himself up for the rest of the afternoon, and only came down to dinner when Ernie and Gilda were finishing that repast. Anton had been peeping at them unseen while the meal went on, and seeing that his Señorita hardly smiled at all, decided that she wanted something, and tried to think what it could be. Not food—which was what Anton himself always preferred to any other gift or treat—no, there were all sorts of beautiful dishes quite near her on the table, peeled oranges dipped in wine, and custard apples sent from Santiago, and Transito's best quince preserve, and a bright yellow jelly with jessamine flowers and tiny china dolls embedded in it to show its clearness. Anton had sat on the kitchen table for an hour watching his mother put them all in their places, and the Señorita had not even touched it! What could she be wanting? Then something told him to climb on the roof and get down the chimney quickly before the master came up; and when he found himself alone in the attic, he knew what the Señorita wanted—the biggest of the yellow-streaked stones off the master's table and the nice piece of white paper lying before it. She had thanked him for his picture on the pear-pat—this was a much cleaner one and just the same, three points in a row, with a big one behind and the thing on a string.

The stone and the paper were slipped inside Anton's shirt in a moment, and while Carlos was still drinking glass after glass of new chicha, the Puma-boy came to his nest on the roof, and sat there waiting for the sound of the step in the attic which would tell him that he could safely go down and find his Señorita swinging in her hammock in the patio. He had not to wait long. His sharp senses caught the opening of a door, the sound of steps, and the odour of a "puro" cigar rising through the short chimney. A little wind came down from the hills, and he pulled the grey cat fur around him and shivered, as every one does at the fall of night in Upper Chile. Anton looked like some enormous bat as he sat there in the twilight, the puma's ears raised over his head, while the other bats, the little black ones, wheeled round the gables above him.

He heard an exclamation of some kind from the room below him, and then the scraping of a chair. He could go down now, for Carlos was probably installed for the evening. So Anton shed his fur, crept to his familiar corner, and in a moment was standing beside Gilda where she sat in her hammock watching Ernie try to catch a humming bird which had somehow made its way up to her jessamines and acacias from the distant plains. A tame green Catura parrokeet, Transito's special pet, was following the boy, pecking at his heels, and asking for attention; and the Hacienda pussy, a huge yellow Tom, came behind the bird, patting him with a friendly paw, or jumping aside as the Catura pretended to nip his tail.

It was all queer, remote, inevitable, and Gilda suddenly gasped for the breezy, many-sided life of Europe. She had not felt the narrowness before, but since Reggie was gone it seemed as if another week of it must choke her. He was right—how glad she was that he was right. She could never bear the conditions of existence here, for she had long outgrown them.

Thinking of serious things, her eyes were still following the funny procession round the patio. In the shade of an orange tree the parrokeet suddenly nipped his friend's tail most successfully, pussy jumping high in the air, and Gilda laughed aloud, for all her grave thoughts. The laugh was repeated just behind her, and she looked round to see Anton standing there, holding out his brown hand with a shining stone in it.

"Para Usted, Señorita, todito para Usted!" he murmured rapturously.

"All for me, Antonsito?" she repeated. "Well, and what is it? How pretty!"

"It is pretty," he answered. "I thought you would like it, for it is the biggest of all upstairs. He has plenty others, but not so bright."

"He?" asked Gilda, puzzled. "Where did you get it?"

He pointed vaguely upstairs. "Shall I get you some more?" he asked.

Gilda looked up in the direction he indicated, and saw the blind windows of the old attics. Then she glanced at the stone in her hand, at the gleam of its gold vein, and turning it over, saw the little label on the other side, "Jan. 16, Pico Delgado, 150 ft. N.E. of Red Pool."

"What a strange thing," she mused aloud. "I suppose he is making a collection. Where is the Red Pool, Anton?" she asked of the boy.

He pointed up the valley. "'Tis there," he said in his gurgling speech, "La Copa de Sangre."

"What an awful name!" she replied, laughing. "Is it far? I would like a good walk."

"A long way," he said. "Will you come?"

"Not to-night, Anton, but to-morrow, perhaps. Is this another present all for me?"

He was holding out Carlos' drawing of the Indian stone, carefully elaborated from his first rough sketch.

"I see," said Gilda, "it is the same you did so nicely on the pear-pat. You are getting very clever, Anton, are you not?"

"Please hide it," he said nervously.

"Very well," she replied, thinking it best to humour him, and folding it small into her pocket. "Ernie," she cried, "you will never catch that humming-bird! Come and see Transito. I am going to take you for a picnic to-morrow."

Ernie came running to her side, and together they passed into the third courtyard, Transito's kingdom.

"Transitito," began Gilda, "where is the red pool that they call La Copa de Sangre? I want to see it."

"Far away to the north," said Transito, looking rather cross. "Why did you not eat any of my beautiful jelly?" she asked in a hurt tone.

"I thought it was to look at," said Ernie. "How did the dolls get inside?"

"That is a secret," said the woman proudly; "have some now, mi linda," she said to Gilda; so the girl and Ernie perched on the kitchen table and Transito beamed when Gilda praised her skill.

"Transitito," said the young mistress at last, "I am going to see that place with the ugly name to-morrow. It sounds interesting. Who can show us the way?"

"Anton knows the hill paths better than anybody," said Transito, pointing to her son where he crouched in a doorway. "He is no good at work, but he can guide you anywhere, and will bring you safely back too."

"That is good," said Gilda. "Now Transitito, early to-morrow morning we are going up into the hills, and you must pack us a nice little basket for our lunch, will you?"

"Of course, it is a good thought," said the sympathetic Transito; "it will keep you from thinking about the Señor Capitan, and it is not gay here alone with Don Carlito, he is always so sad."

"So cross," put in Ernie's high pipe. "I love picnics, and I shall be so glad to be away with you, all by ourselves."

"We must have a pony for the basket, and perhaps for you too, Ernie. Come along to the stables and we will talk to the 'Mozo' about it."

The next day Ernie came and awoke Gilda at the dawn, and long before the sun was up the little party had left the Hacienda and were making for the higher end of the valley. The mists still lay in white ribbons between the hills like dream rivers caught by the day. The hum of life had not begun, and the silence hung unbroken on hut and field and yesterday's furrow gaping brown in the cool light. In the deep clover fields the kine stirred as they passed, and raised pointed horns wet with dew, and turned slow questioning eyes on these disturbers of the dawn. The air was divinely sharp and moist yet, and Anton pulled his puma skin closer as he pattered along, leading the patient pony, and Gilda and Ernie stepped out smartly after him, breathing in long draughts of the new air, untainted yet by dust or sun. Far away a great white bank of cloud had come down and closed the valley, shutting out all glimpses of the further hills.

"I never thought I should be so glad to get away from the Hacienda," said Gilda confidentially to Ernie; "but we couldn't have stood the house to-day, could we?"

"No," said the small boy, "course we couldn't. Without Reggie——"

"And with Carlos?" replied Gilda, laughing light-heartedly enough. "I wonder what makes him so eternally cross and grumpy!"

"Never mind," said Ernie, "we're all right for to-day, anyhow. There goes a fox!"

Anton at once dropped the rein and gave chase, running like a greyhound up the hill, but in a few minutes the others caught him

up where he waited for them at a branch of the path, and he soberly slipped his arm through the rein and went on, whistling a little tune that Gilda had sung to Reggie two nights ago. He was so gentle and reasonable that Gilda could not imagine how he came to be considered crazy. His absolute refusal to work could hardly be called madness. He seemed to know every step of the mountain tracks and noticed everything on the way, gathering the few wild flowers that grew here and there and making a posy of them for his beloved Señorita.

But very soon the valley and its greenness was a thing of the past, and they were following stony tracks which would be scorching later in the day. The cloud gate had opened and a cool breeze blew down from the snow which still lay on Aconcagua. Anton pointed to where three peaks rose in a line just below the outline of the crowning mountain.

"It is there," he said, "a little this side of that last one."

Gilda looked and saw the outline of the drawing he had brought her. "Why, that is your picture, Antonsito," she cried; but he looked with dull eyes that saw no resemblance to the lines he had traced.

"No," he said irritably; "that was a paper, not mountains."

"I think I'll ride a bit, please," said Ernie, "my boots are tired."

So he was lifted on the pony's back, beside Transito's hamper, and they moved on towards their still distant goal.

Carlos too had risen early that morning. He had slept badly, had dreamt that some one else had found the mine before him, and as soon as he was fairly awake went upstairs to see if his Brownie had returned a piece of paper which had been spirited away the night before. He knew that it was lying on the table when he went down to dinner, and when he came back it had disappeared, and though he searched from end to end of the room thinking some puff of wind might have sent it flying, no trace rewarded his patience, and he had gone to bed in a state of nervous fear and fury impossible to describe. In vain he attempted to ascribe these diabolical tricks to any human agency. His fortress was impregnable for anything more solid than a spirit. He was uncomfortably convinced of that, and never thought of the disused chimney, masked by some heavy boxes which he had pushed across it a day or two ago; a barrier which in no way impeded the movements of his cunning tormentor, who found it rather an assistance than otherwise.

So Carlos rose early, just as the sun began to pick out the hills with red gold, and came to seek for his precious drawing. But it appeared that the Brownie had overslept himself that morning, for nothing had been returned. One of his bits of quartz was also missing, but he cared less about that now that he held a clue to the old mine itself. The paper was still of value, and held indications which might make themselves as clear to others as they had done to him. He came downstairs and began to search the rooms, for a sudden idea had struck him and brought relief with it—perhaps he had taken to walking in his sleep and had himself carried it away.

So he went into the study where he had had his talk with Gilda, into the drawing-room and found nothing there. The house seemed strangely silent; as a rule, Gilda was having her early tea in a white dressing-gown under the verandah at this hour, and Transito was hovering around her, and Ernie sitting on the steps in his sleeping clothes eating fruit and chattering shrilly. Gilda had taken possession of the establishment in a most imperious way, and the establishment had no attention or service for anybody else; this was not the least of her sins in the eyes of the usurper; but this morning everything was quite still and not a sound broke the silence except the flutter of pigeons up to the eaves as he entered the second patio. The doors were all open, and in Gilda's room he could see Transito sweeping in a whirl of dust. He came and stood in the doorway.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he asked irritably.

"Eh, Señor! You frightened me," cried the woman turning at his voice. "The Señorita has gone out with Don Ernestito and they have taken their breakfast with them, that's all."

"Go and make my chocolate," said Carlos. He had caught sight of a paper tossed down on the dressing-table and it looked like the one he sought. Transito

dropped her broom and ran off to the kitchen, and as soon as he was alone Carlos crossed the room and picked up the white square, which was indeed his drawing, the copy of the one on the stone in the cave.

A dark flush rose to his forehead as he recognised it, and recognised too, the bit of quartz lying beneath it. He imagined that Gilda had fathomed all his secrets, that she knew of the gold, would forestall him in discovering the mine, had gone out to seek for it now. His brain was all unsettled by fear, and avarice, and the terrors of remorse, which had slept for years till Gilda came, and by her mere look and manner set them all tearing at his heart once more. It seemed as if some maddening spirit were always at his side, whispering "Was it worth while? Was it really worth while?"

But for his excited and unnatural state he would have realised that Gilda's first thought on making such a discovery would have been to impart it to him. What could she do without his help? But he was long past quiet reasoning, and all his powers of thought were concentrated on the question of how to prevent her from going further; how to make her powerless if she had already gone too far.

He was furiously angry as well as frightened, for he believed that Gilda had deliberately stolen the plan and the stone, though how she had been able to lay hands on them he could not understand, unless by some unheard-of mistake he had left the door unlocked the night before.

When Transito came to seek for him with her jingling tray, he was sitting in the little library, by the writing table, looking so black that she put down the tray and got away as quickly as possible, muttering that Don Carlito looked more like the dead Intendente than ever when he got cross. The Intendente had had just those fits of bad temper, peace to his soul!

Carlos soon decided that he must follow whither Gilda had gone, but he would not go unarmed; the passes were lonely, he explained to himself, as with trembling hands he loaded his old pistols.

He put a flask of aguardiente in his pocket, changed his shoes for a kind of Indian sandal which he found more useful for rock work, and took the path for his cave in the hillside, which to him was the best starting-point for the three peaks. Anton, who knew the paths as a fox knows its earth, was taking Gilda and Ernie to the same spot by a steeper and shorter track. They had been gone a couple of hours when Carlos finally started to follow them by the more roundabout way of the cave. It was some months since he had been in the neighbourhood of the Red Pool, for before he got this last clue, he had nearly convinced himself that the old mine lay somewhere to the west of Aconcagua's lower terraces, a direction a good deal removed from the Copa de Sangre; he had, as he thought, searched those three peaks again and again, as far up as it was possible to hope for a trace of old diggings, but without finding any. The diagram seemed to point to a spot higher than any he had yet scaled, and certainly the time had come to go and see.

XI

THE sun was getting high when Anton led the pony through the last defile and down to the northern edge of the dark red pool. It lay stagnant, in glassy streaks where the sky was reflected red and lowering—streaks which slowly changed and moved as the surface at the far end beneath the rocks broke out in slimy bubbles that rose and drifted and then broke, leaving sickly rings of greyish froth on the turbid water.

"What an awful place!" said Gilda, as they came down and stood on the edge of the tarn. "I am almost sorry we came, Ernie."

"It does look nasty!" said Ernie, leaning over from the side of the pony to gaze into the pool. The animal was thirsty and put its muzzle down as if to drink, then drew back, and turned its head away. Anton smoothed its ears.

"What is the matter?" asked Gilda. "Let him drink, Anton; he is thirsty."

"The horse won't drink that," he said, pointing to the water; "it is bad water—poisoned; he knows better."

"Who poisoned it?" asked Gilda, quickly drawing back.

"Quien sabe, Señorita?" he replied. "Los Indianos, or the Leones—or Don Carlito."

He spoke quite seriously.

"Nonsense!" said Gilda, rather severely. "You must not say those things, Anton.

You would get punished if the Padron heard you."

Anton glanced round anxiously. "He is not here, is he?" he cried. Then he came and stood close to Gilda's side. "You are here," he said, taking hold of a bit of her dress; "he cannot beat me if you are here, can he?"

"Nobody wants to beat you, pobresito," said Gilda. "You have been quite a good boy lately. Now take us where we can get some shade and unpack our basket. Don Ernestito is getting hungry, aren't you, Ernie?"

"I shall be hungry when I'm not so hot," replied that young gentleman. "I should think there was fifteen dozen suns behind that cloud. Why is it so hot up here, I wonder!"

There was a heavy white glare, veiling the sunshine but intensifying the heat to an almost unbearable degree. Suddenly the pool before them appeared to heave, a long rumble was heard beneath their feet, and the pony started and then stood still, trembling, with terrified eyes and snorting nostrils. Anton fell on the ground and hid his face, shaking in every limb. Gilda stooped and shook him sharply by the shoulders.

"It is nothing," she said, and it must be owned that she spoke rather tremulously; "just a touch of earthquake. There is nothing to be afraid of."

Anton looked up, quite pale brown. "Ah, Señorita de mi alma," he wailed, "I am afraid! The 'temblor' will come through some day, and kill us all."

He believed, as many saner people do in wild countries, that the "temblor" was an awful monster trying to break out.

"Come on," said Ernie from his perch, "you are getting wet, Mrs. Edmondson; look at your feet!"

She sprang back hastily, for the ugly flood was breaking in circles round her feet. A little movement seemed to have been imparted to it by the earthquake shock, for it was still heaving sullenly from one bank to another; it looked like dark flowing blood, and Gilda turned away in horror.

Then Anton led them by a winding track to the north side of the pool, which appeared to be a wall of inaccessible rocks until they came close to it where it shelved back from the water at the head of the little lake. Here what had looked like a mere crack in the rock proved to be a cleft running heart deep into the stone, and rising as it went. There was just room for one person to walk at a time, and the steps had to be taken carefully along the shelving side, for the rift sank down below, sometimes only for a few feet, sometimes in a black crack over abysmal darkness.

"Get down, Don Ernestito," said the Puma-boy, "you cannot ride any more. We must leave the pony here."

Gilda translated, Ernie slid down to the ground at her side, and Anton hobbled the pony and turned it loose.

"It is a bad road, Anton," said Gilda; "is it safe for the Señorito?"

"I have not fallen," said Anton, looking away up the gorge. "I come often yesterday. It is not far. There is a good place to sit."

Gilda was becoming used to his phrases, and knew that yesterday meant past years.

"Well," she said, turning to Ernie, "if you are at all afraid, Ernie boy, we won't go. Do you think you can do it?"

"I guess I can," said Ernie, his eyes shining at the thought of an adventure. "Let's try, anyway."

So they tried, and found that it was not so very difficult after all. Anton went first, and the long bridle which he had taken off the pony was passed through his belt, then round Ernie's waist—much to that hero's distaste—and finally made fast to Gilda's wrist, so that the little boy could not fall very far if he fell alone. Anton seemed in his element, and as sane as Gilda herself. At every difficult step he looked back and pointed to where Ernie must place his feet, and now and then he would sing a snatch of some jingling "cueca" tune, which brought the rock pigeons wheeling out of their holes far above, between the travellers and the distant sky, which still blazed white over the narrow cleft like a blade turned down to strike.

Where the little company clambered from ledge to ledge, far down in the gully, it was dark and even moist, for the sun seldom penetrated here, and from time to time a tiny trickle of water on the rock's face showed that they had penetrated to the home of self-feeding springs not subject to

the desolating summer drought which reigned on the surface of the hills. Gilda and Ernie gladly bathed their hot faces in the clear dropping rills, and felt refreshed, in spite of their long climb. Anton had not turned a hair, and seemed to have forgotten his recent terrors.

When the sky came at last a little nearer, a path made itself visible turning off at a sharp angle behind a rock, and this Anton led them into, leaving the gully which ran on for a long way into the hills, twisting and breaking here and there so as not to split them up too much apparently. The new path scaled up, sharply enough, towards the daylight, and Gilda had to call to Anton not to go so fast, since she and Ernie found it all that they could do to keep their footing. She was glad, and very much out of breath, when they finally emerged on a tiny plateau on the side of a cone which rose steeply behind them. The sharp air of those empty heights, the dazzling daylight, and what seemed like the whole world rolling away in a sea of enormous mountains thousands of feet below, smote Gilda with an impression which made her dizzy and faint. She sat down weakly and Ernie sank beside her, and they leant back against the hillside, both speechless and very pale. Ernie twisted his arm round hers and put his head on her shoulder. Anton had dropped the leather thong, and was standing quite at ease on the edge of the little nick in the mountain side, looking out and around, and breathing in the rarefied air with distended nostrils.

Out of the sea of peaks and terraces before them rose Aconcagua, battlement on battlement of yellow rock tossed in heaven's face for a defiance, a shred of snow clinging here and there to its sides like an undried tear on an angry cheek. For all its two and twenty thousand feet from earth the white-domed sky seemed blind to its greatness, the sun laughed overhead, and shot his vertical fires as gaily and hotly on the smallest of its foot hills as on the giant's sovereign brow, towering in the remoteness of its royalty.

Ernie was the first to speak. "It is awfully big," he said, "I'd rather go down again."

"We must rest," Gilda replied, beginning to feel less infinitesimally light and small.

"Are you not tired?" she asked, bringing her eyes unwillingly back from those aërial wonders and glancing down into his face.

"A little," he said, and then forgetting his thought, as a child so quickly does, he went on, "I am glad we weren't here when that earthquake came! It must have shaken about dreadfully."

"The earthquake has done something," she replied, pointing to some bits of stone that seemed to be fresh fallen on the small terrace. "It would not have been pleasant to get those on one's head, would it?"

Ernie was interested now and jumped up to examine them. Gilda rose more slowly and followed him, rather to keep an eye on his safety than from any curiosity.

"There's a hole," cried Ernie, "look!"

He was already climbing like a cat up two or three large stones which still filled the lower part of an opening or rough tunnel into the hill. It seemed that the vibration had dislodged the upper blocks which were evidently the last left by the shocks of centuries, since the steeps below were cumbered with boulders wherever some inequality gave them a footing, and the flat space round the doorway was thick with them. It looked as if the terrace had been filled with stones at some time or other. Ernie got a leg over the edge of the opening and paused for a moment, peering into the blackness beyond. Gilda flew to him and caught his other foot.

"It's all right," he said, bringing his head out again and looking down at her, "there's a nice smooth place. I'm going in!"

"No, you're not," she answered, "come down directly. There may be anything inside there!"

At this point Anton intervened and pulled Ernie down, struggling manfully, and fighting for his independence.

"I will go in first, Don Ernestito," said Anton, "and then you and the Señorita can come."

Gilda had to hold her small friend by force while the brown boy sprang over into the darkness. They heard his naked feet pattering on the rocks for a few minutes, and then his grey head looked out over the barrier.

"It is beautiful," he said, "you must come in, Señorita. I will knock those stones out and then you can walk over them."

Gilda pulled Ernie back, and in a few

minutes two more big stones went to swell the pile below, and Ernie dragged Gilda through the low archway.

They stopped in surprise on finding themselves in a fairly large space, pierced high up by some crack to the daylight which came through in a white shaft. The floor was uneven and sloped down roughly to a dark opening at the opposite side. Gilda's foot rang against something metallic which rolled away slowly towards the further arch. Ernie picked it up with difficulty, for it was heavy, and held it up for her to see. In the cold half light she beheld an old conical headpiece, crusted with black rust and battered out of shape, but still bearing the loose chain which had passed under the chin of a long-dead wearer. Gilda drew back shuddering.

"The place is a tomb!" she cried, "a Spanish tomb! Oh, what have we done?"

She glanced around nervously, expecting to see some poor skeleton protesting against sacrilegious intrusion. But the space was empty and her voice went echoing down the darkness of the further tunnel. Anton was already making his way into it. He had as little fear of the dark as a fox or a jaguar. It had never hurt him yet.

"Do come a little further," Ernie entreated. Unwillingly she entered the passage, found that it got unaccountable rays of light from somewhere, and noticed that they were given back from shining points in the rocky walls. Then she and Ernie, always following Anton, were suddenly in a large space, very dim and dark, with only the thinnest beam of daylight to make visible what was close to them. But there, right at their feet, were piles of strange utensils, bowls and dishes, a broken spear, a stone table with deep openings in the top, and, dripping steadily from the wall, a runnel of clear water which had scooped a channel for itself in the silence of centuries, and ran in it till it fell with a cool tinkle over the edge of a deep opening in the darkness at the end of the chamber.

Curiosity now overcame fear and awe. Gilda sought in her pocket for the box of lights which she had learnt to carry in her many journeys, and striking a taper held it high above her head. She saw many strange objects, and one familiar one. But the familiar one alarmed her most. It was the face of Carlos close to her own, his eyes looking into hers with the very insanity of hatred.

Gilda saw a brown thing flash silently past; that was Anton making for the open hillside. Then her light went out and she was left alone in the almost darkness, Ernie clinging to her in sudden terror, and her worst enemy holding her arm in a crushing grip.

"You thief, she-devil!" he hissed, in a strangled voice. "You have found the mine, have you? Do you think it is going to do you any good?"

In that moment something fell from her eyes. There was no time to unravel mysteries, but this was not her brother. She knew it now, and her spirit rose against him in a fury of righteous anger which overcame fear.

"Let me go," she cried, "your touch burns me, base Huaso that you are! And you have dared to call yourself Carlos Edmondson!"

"Por Dios! and so shall you call me too!" he answered, feeling that all the terrors of years had taken shape at last.

And then he struck her, and she fell against the old stone furnace; and Ernie flew at him, and bit his hand and kicked his legs, and was shaken off like an adder as the man fled, stumbling and knocking himself in the darkness, to the outer chamber and the outer air. He leant for an instant against the entrance, drawing his breath in gasps, the moisture dropping from his grey-white face. Then he set his teeth, deliberately turned, and began to build up the doorway with the heaviest stones that he could move, and almost laughed when he heard shriek upon shriek ring along the passage from Ernie, who could not get Gilda to answer him and who was wailing for help in the dark.

Oh, for a trowel and mortar, thought Carlos, as he tried to make the stones fit in, and found that for all his deadly intent they would be but a loose pile, easily knocked over. He dragged other and bigger ones against them, and tore his hands and clothes in lifting them up on the heap. The sister should have a better funeral than the brother had got, he said to himself. She had found his mine—she should stay there and guard it for him till it suited him to come and visit her. He would take away

"The place is a tomb," she cried

a stone or two then, and people would say that she and the child had got in and had not been able to get out again, poor things, poor unfortunate creatures! Had he seen another shadow there in the darkness? He was almost sure that he had. If so, that was the Puma-boy. But he was insane, nobody would listen to him, and soon he could go too. What a mercy that he had thought of coming to-day! He could not imagine what road they had taken, for he had come by the upper track, along many a weary hillside, and had caught no glimpse of these two—or were they three?

It was finished now; a very neat piece of work considering all things, and he had better get away as fast as possible. What an excitement there would be down at the Hacienda when night came on and the Señorita had not returned! They would make search parties, and he would lead one far away to the west, not in this direction, oh never, never in this direction, lest they should hear those awful smothered shrieks that even the stones could not keep in.

Then he began to run to get away from the sounds, and did not stop till he was far down the mountain on the track by which Anton had led his party up from the Red Pool. Carlos struck it by accident and rushed down, hardly thinking whither it would lead, but only certain that here was a shorter way by which to fly from what he had left in the old mine. He was too disturbed to mark the strange portent of a storm-cloud rolling down black and heavy behind Aconcagua, his ears were too full of other sounds to notice the long growls of repeated earthquake shocks answering to the muffled roar of still distant thunder. His feet, winged by the terror of his own crime, sped too fast for him to feel the sullen heavings with which the earth seemed to resent his footsteps on her polluted bosom. When he fell again and again in that wild flight from rock to scarp, from scarp to gully, he thought it was his own faintness and dizziness which threw him from side to side and yet tossed him across those gaping fissures, which were wider and darker now than when Gilda and Ernie had followed Anton along their edges three hours ago.

But when he reached the lower levels, where a cool path had run between the rock walls for them, Carlos found fast-rising water, thick and dark where it lipped its way towards him, red further on where it was already deep enough to catch the light of a gloomy sky. He did not hesitate but ran on, thinking it was some small spring flooding the path for a few yards. Then he had to wade, his foot slipped, and only a spur of stone at which he caught kept him from falling face downwards in the encroaching tide. The gully turned a few feet ahead of where he stood, and by exerting great strength and care he managed to find a foothold along the inequalities of the stone and crawl out above the drowned path to see what lay beyond.

When at last, clinging with both hands, he could bring his head above the little crag, that which he saw turned his ashen face still greyer, and at first made him think that he was looking at the vision of a dream. He knew the spot now, from the surrounding hills, from Aconcagua's mighty outline before him; it was the Red Pool where he had so often dug and washed for gold. But the small pool had gone, and in its place a wide lake spread to the feet of the hills on either side, a lake red and bubbling like fresh-drawn blood. Under the rocks, a little to his right, it was welling up still in gurgling ripples as if pumped from the very heart of the world. The subterranean spring, stirred and set free from some internal convulsion of nature, was filling all the cup-like glen; when it should rise above the lip of the bowl, where the tracks all led downhill, there would be a new river in the Andes. To Carlos, hanging on his scarp of rock, it seemed a lake of blood rising to swallow him up for ever. He was past calculating distances, past any sane reasoning. The only sense left alive was the one which screamed for flight, and he turned from that vision of blood, innocent blood (as he heard something shrieking in his ears), and laying his body close to the stone, with torn garments and gashed hands and feet, he crawled back and up, back and up, as a rock scorpion works to its hole, until he regained a point on an upward track which the water had not reached.

But that was not enough for this terror-stricken sinner. It seemed to him that the avenging flood would creep after him, would welter over his head, would drown the peaks and hide the world ere the wounds which

poured it forth were staunched. He dared not rest, nor stay to breathe; oh, where was anything strong enough or high enough to bar its way? He looked at his hands, red and torn with this climb for life, and he shuddered anew at the sight of their redness. He looked up to heaven which he had denied and blasphemed, and the sky frowned black and revengeful in the dark majesty of the coming storm. He would have prayed, had he dared, for his mantle of cynicism had been left on the rocks below, but he shivered again at the thought of calling the attention of a just God, the Father of the fatherless, as his boyhood had learnt to name Him, to his trembling self, the robber of orphans and shedder of innocent blood.

Every man carries the Eumenides in the prison of his inner consciousness. The blow that he strikes to his neighbour's hurt sets them free to tear at his heart-strings, till at last he consents to let them scourge him up the steep road of repentance back to peace.

And Carlos' road was steep that day. Steep and very long. When he looked down after what seemed hours of climbing, he could still see the gleam of the crimson stream at the foot of the gully, and then he moved on, panting in his terror lest it should rise and engulf him. He could not know that it had reached the limit set for the wildest flood in the morning of time, its own level. It had touched the rim of the mountain cup on the farther side and was beginning to run in many a sinuous turn, to the lower valleys, and down towards Gilda's clover fields at last. And now the still, hot mountains seemed to heave and gasp once more as they lay under the brassy sky, and heaven took pity on them and sent a great wind tearing down from the north, blowing a storm of snow off Aconcagua and searching every cranny of the Cordillera with long-drawn notes like cries of warning whistling down each lone divide, answering from hollows where the puma nursed her young and the condor fed its screaming brood. Every cave took up the echo and repeated the long roar and the piercing whistle, the unmade music of the storm. The blast was so rending that when it struck the defeated climber on the hillside he had to lie down even with the ground and cling to every jutting stone so as not to be carried away and hurled, a ravelled rag of humanity, to the depths below. And as he lay there, face downwards, clutching frantically at the stone with hands and feet and teeth in the annihilation of his manhood, the first thunderbolt fell with a deafening crash twenty paces from him and showered fragments of shivered stone over his head and hands. Then came torrents of blinding rain, beating down as they beat in the deluge, till the hillside was a sheet of water giving back the copper glare of the sky. Carlos knew not by what miracle he was not swept down with it to where it met those red streams that he was fleeing from, but when at last it slackened a little, and he dared to raise his head, he found that he had not slipped, his feet were stayed firmly on a jut of the rock, and he could venture to loosen his cramped fingers and turn his face to the sky. Every stroke of hail and rain had seemed like knotted whips as he lay prone through their lashings, and breathing was reduced to a thousand repetitions of an unspoken word—mercy, mercy, mercy!

XII

If the day had seemed eternal to Carlos beaten by every terror of the storm on the open hillside, it was almost more intolerable to those two whom he had tried to shut into a living grave on its crest. The storm eclipsed the feeble rays of light which had found their way into the place earlier in the day, and complete darkness reigned in the forgotten chambers of the rock where Gilda and Ernie sat, closely clasped, children together in their helplessness and fear, listening to the terrible battle of thunder and lightning, wind and rain which roared and beat against the outer walls of their prison. The storm found many a howling echo in the caverns of the rocks, and again and again the two were thrown forward from the wall against which they leant, into the untried space before them by quick repeated shocks of earthquake, whose smothered rumblings were more awful than the sharp cracks of the thunder overhead.

When Gilda, stunned at first by her fall against the stone, came to herself, she could not remember what had happened, and thought that she was in her bed at home,

and that Ernie was screaming in some wild dream in the next room. Then she felt him catching at her hands, her dress, and she tried to rise and said:

"All right, Ernie dear, don't be frightened, I will light the candle."

But as she put out her hand to help herself up, she touched that dead cold rock and remembered everything with a sick gasp of apprehension such as she had never felt before in her life. Still, she must quiet the poor child, so she got his hands into hers and soothed him till he stopped screaming and began to sob for joy that she was not dead. Then she sat up and got her back against the rock and insisted upon his being quiet and listening to what she wanted to say. He came in close under her arm and held her other hand in his, and made a great effort to control himself. She would not speak till his sobs had ceased.

"I am quiet now," he said at last, with a little catch between every word; "please talk; I will be good."

"I know you will," said poor Gilda, casting about for comfort to administer to him; "and you know, really, Ernie, though it would be nicer to have some daylight, this is very interesting. It is a great, big, real adventure."

"Yes," said the small boy without much conviction in his voice. Then the tale was taken up by some hollow rumblings from below, and neither spoke till those had died away. All Gilda's courage had come back with her attempt to comfort Ernie, but she realised fully that he and she were in a very disagreeable situation.

"Yes," she went on, trying to make her voice steady, "a real adventure, and you shall tell Reggie all about it—to-night, at dinner, Ernie."

"But he won't be there," objected the boy. "He's away in Santiago."

"I expect he will come back," said Gilda, and added in her own mind that Reggie was more likely to be there than they were. Then she continued, "But, all the same, I think it has lasted long enough—this part of it at any rate. Oh!" as a thunderbolt seemed to fall just above their heads and bits of rock and earth came rattling to the ground.

"I'd like it if I could see it," Ernie cried; "it's the dark that's so horrid, do let's get out!"

"That is just what we are going to do," she answered. "At least we will have a look at things. I fancy while the storm goes on we are safer inside. Now let us light a match if I can find the box. Don't move from where you are, Ernie; I must have dropped it when—that man came in. Oh what does it all mean?"

"Oh don't move!" said her little companion, clutching her tightly as she tried to rise. "You'll get lost and I shall be here all alone."

"No, I will be very careful," she replied; "and it must be close to us, on top of this kind of shelf perhaps."

She was passing her hand over the top of the old smelting furnace, and there, near the wall, was her box of lights. The very rattle of them comforted her, and she struck one and looked around.

"That's the way we came in," she said, pointing to a low arch opposite.

"And what's over there?" asked Ernie, pointing to the hole at the far end of the floor.

"I don't know," she said as her light went out. "For heaven's sake, don't move, Ernie boy!" she cried to him in the darkness. Then she struck another match and they made for the entrance to the passage, stumbling over the scattered arms and utensils with which the place was strewn.

"But there was light when we came, just a little," said the child.

"Perhaps it is getting dark outside," she suggested, trembling in spite of herself at the thought of spending the night in this awful place. "Come along, I think we shall soon get out!"

So she groped her way down the passage, making Ernie hold her dress behind. The way seemed long, and was wet and dripping in many places. At last she felt fuller air on her brow and her arms touched nothing when she stretched them out, so she thought that they must have reached the first chamber.

Again she struck a match and glanced round. Yes, the opening was there, but so choked by heavy stones that no ray of daylight came through. To assure her that this was the chamber through which they had passed, her foot struck against the same old helmet that she had stumbled over before. Their enemy had made them prisoners.

She dragged Ernie towards the piled stones

before the match went out, and hastily they tried to pull away the boulders. But it was dangerous work, for if they moved a lower one the stones from above came rolling down on their hands and feet, and Gilda had so few lights that she was unwilling to strike any more. She found now that she had sprained her wrist in her fall, and her right hand was becoming intensely painful. The slender girl and the little boy were quite unable to move any of the larger pieces of stone, which had been powerfully wedged from without, and at last sank down together in deepest discouragement and exhaustion.

Gilda could not bring herself to believe that Carlos meant to leave them there, unless he had suddenly become insane. Certainly that conclusion seemed a terribly probable one now. His inexplicable fury at finding her in the cave, and his closing the entrance were the acts of a madman. That must have been why she suddenly felt and said that he was not her brother!

Suddenly she remembered Anton, and called his name again and again to the sounding cavern.

"I think he ran away," said Ernie, "when that Carlos came in."

"He is the saner of the two," groaned Gilda, "perhaps he will find Reggie and come back."

They were both terribly weary with their exertions, and beginning to feel faint from want of food. In a kind of stupor they sat down as near the closed entrance as they could, and Gilda leant against a stone, while Ernie laid his head on her lap. The storm was still muttering outside, but the roar had abated and there were no more shocks of earthquake. Every sound of dropping water or sliding gravel made Gilda start, thinking that some wild beast had smelt them out; and as night descended outside, the inner blackness seemed to become more intense, till it pressed on her forehead like a weight of lead. Hours passed away. Ernie woke from a doze and said sleepily:

"What day is it, Mrs. Edmondson?"

"I think it is Christmas Eve, Ernie," she answered after a moment's thought. "Reggie meant to get back to-night."

"Oh what a dreadful Christmas Eve!" he cried, wriggling up into a sitting position. "We was going to see the church all full of candles, and then we was going to have supper and play games! Oh, this is so dreadful!"

Gilda drew him closer to her and spoke very gently. She had never had to preach to anybody before, so she did not say much.

"There was another Christmas Eve, Ernie, you know. Very cold, in a cave, with no candles or games. Suppose we sing the old hymn?" And then the preacher and the congregation lifted up a tremulous little strain which grew stronger with the comfort it brought,

"Oh come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
Oh come, oh come ye to Bethlehem!"

A man in drenched garments tottered heavily along the little terrace outside and fell on his knees with his hands spread out against the stones. The sky was quite dark but for one tearful rift low down in the west where a waning moon was setting in heavy clouds.

The storm was over with all its terrors, and Carlos thought it must have killed the two whom he had left in the dark for the rocks to crush if the rocks would but fall on them. Many a great boulder had crashed out into space that night in the fury of the hurricane, many a giant wall was cloven through, many a secret of earth, kept since the Creation, would be published in to-morrow's sunshine; the earthquakes had changed the shapes of some of the hills since morning; he had seen one such storm before, so he knew. They were dead, and the spirits were singing to them, oh, how sweetly! Would any one sing for him when he was dead? Oh no, he had killed more than one, and there would never be any singing for him. But he would see, he would send them a message—the dead forgave—sometimes.

Then the stricken man gathered all his strength and began feverishly to pull out the smaller stones which kept the greater ones in place; he remembered how a man called Carlos—Carlos what?—well, it did not matter, Carlos had pushed them in so cleverly and tightly in the daylight! They fell now, rattling against the hard rock, and then the singing suddenly ceased, and a cry came to him through an opening.

"Reggie, Anton, who is it?" Gilda's voice asked joyfully. But he did not answer. He had only one word to say to Carlos

Edmondson's sister, and he would say it face to face when he got her out. He pulled away stone after stone and sent them hurling down the slope. The two human creatures within had sprung to their feet, hoping for deliverance, yet fearing that this might mean some new misfortune. The man was working madly now, all his strength seemed to have come back to him to undo at least this last crime.

He raised himself as a boulder leapt away from his hands. The entrance was clear, and in the first light of the Christmas dawn the girl and boy stood in it, clinging together, and the spent wind blew cool in their white faces.

The last stroke of the invisible scourge brought the man to his knees before them. His clasped hands were torn and bleeding, his heavy face, drawn in great lines of agony, looked up towards Gilda, and his hoarse voice screamed brokenly:

"Forgive! Tell God you forgive! I killed him—I am not he!"

He fell forward in a heap, and Gilda staggered a little. Then she broke away from Ernie, and going forward, tried to lift the man's head. It lay back on her arm, and he seemed trying to speak again.

"I know," said Gilda Edmondson, "I understand now. Yes," and she leant over and spoke clearly, for all that her lips trembled pitifully, "I forgive—all. You need not tell any more."

His head fell a little to one side and he seemed to draw a sigh of relief.

"What is it? What does it mean?" said Ernie, awestruck at the silence.

Gilda withdrew her hand from under the head that no longer seemed to need it.

"It means—that it is Christmas morning, Ernie," she said, and then as Ernie stood by her where she knelt, she turned and hid her face on his thin little shoulder, and wept bitterly.

. . . . . .

A great fear came upon Reggie after hearing the cattle driver's strange story, and he felt that he could not stay in Santiago another hour while Gilda was alone in that remote place with the man who had murdered her brother. He did not stop to think what would be the best step to take, for that could be considered later. Two things were clear now—he must get back to Gilda, and Carlos must be confronted with Juan that there might be absolutely no doubt as to his identity.

It was still very early when he entered his cousin's room and shook him to rouse him from sleep. "Get up, Ted," he said, "and come up to the Hacienda with me; I am starting in half an hour."

"Eh, what?" said his cousin sleepily. "What's the hurry?"

"Tell you afterwards," said Reggie shortly. "Get dressed and come with me like a good chap. I can't rest till I get up there and see that nothing has happened."

"What it is to be in love!" groaned Ted. "Oh, all right, yes, I'll get up! You order some breakfast for me then!"

Reggie was halfway downstairs already, storming about a carriage which he wanted immediately. The host was surly, said that people had no business to want carriages on Christmas Day. Half the servants had not come home last night, and certainly every stable boy and driver in Santiago would be drunk this morning.

"The horses are not drunk, anyway," said Reggie in answer to these arguments. "You get them harnessed and we'll do the driving. Make haste."

He could look very stern when he gave an order, and no more difficulties were made. Then he walked quickly down to where Juan was dispensing strong drinks to whoever was sober enough to pay for them.

The ex-sailor was unwilling to come with him at first, but his disinclination gave way before a ten-dollar note which Reggie put into his hand. He was assured that he should return that night, and meanwhile a neighbour, whose own stores were exhausted, was asked to take charge of the establishment, and one of the old women told to keep an eye on the neighbour to see that he did not cheat, for every Chilean of the lower classes sees a robber in every other Chilean till he is proved honest.

Juan slipped his head through the hole in his poncho, put on his huge sombrero, and followed Reggie to the hotel, jingling his spurs and carefully pulling his sleeves down over his blue arms. A lad had been found who could sit upright and hold the reins, and Juan climbed to the seat beside him, having no desire to face the naval-

looking gentleman's keen eyes for two or three hours.

Reggie and his cousin talked most of the way, and by the time that they had crossed the plain and reached the foothills, Ted Brownlow was in possession of all that the other knew. Reggie was pale with restrained excitement. It was forty-eight hours since he had left her. Who could say what might have happened since? The last part of the way bore witness to the violence of the storm, which had blown down trees and shattered rocks so that the road was a good deal encumbered in places.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when the carriage reached the front door of the Hacienda de los Demonios and all but ran over Transito, who was doubled up on the ground outside the archway, rocking herself backwards and forwards in grief bordering on stupor. Since the afternoon of the day before, the poor woman had been in an agony of apprehension as to the fate of the three who had gone so gaily up the valley in the dawn. She saw the storm begin to gather behind Aconcagua, and despatched labourers and servants in different directions to seek for the wanderers and call them in. The master too was out, and there was no one of whom she could take counsel. The peones had not returned to her, having quickly slunk back to their huts when the storm broke. Who would face *that* willingly, up in the mountains? Then the pony had come in riderless, and that had added to the fears which had been her only company through the awful thunder and lightning, through the repeated earthquake shocks which brought down some of the chimneys and threatened to shatter the whole building. At any other time she would have fled to the cellars for safety, but her grief and anxiety about "the children" made her quite careless as to what might happen to herself. She was cursing, for the hundredth time, her own shortsightedness in letting Anton be responsible for Gilda and Ernie, when Reggie and his companions drew up before the doorway.

"Oh, Señor!" she shrieked, and fell on her knees and burst into tears.

Reggie sprang out and rushed to her, all his worst fears confirmed. "Where is the Señorita?" he cried, laying a heavy hand on her shoulder.

He was answered by a flood of lamentations in Spanish, of which he could hardly understand anything.

"What does she mean, Ted?" he cried in despair, turning to his cousin. But here Juan came forward to act as interpreter. A colloquy in Spanish ensued, during which Transito pointed up the valley several times, the tears still streaming down her cheeks.

Then Juan translated, and Reggie's white face turned a shade paler, and his mouth set in a straight stern line.

"Heavens and earth," said Ted, "all gone —yesterday? Out there, in the storm?" And his eyes followed the direction of Transito's fingers.

"Yes, sir," said Juan. "They was four if I make the old woman out right. A young lady and two boys—and the gentleman you wanted me to see."

"They have taken shelter somewhere and were not able to get back," said Brownlow. "You'll find them all safe, Reggie."

"Not together, heaven grant," said Reggie between his teeth. "Now let us go and look for them."

Some of the peones were gathered together and told to lead the way towards the red pool. Reggie hardly spoke till they reached it, or reached what was the Red Pool yesterday. The Chileans uttered a cry and crossed themselves at the sight of a wide hollow from which all the water had been sucked away in some freak of volcanic nature during the night. The dark flood which had terrified Carlos when it seemed to be rising to engulf him, had all sunk back to the heart of the great Earth Mother, and its place was covered by a thick cloak of reddish mud. Only at the farther side near the wall of rock, a deep hole yawned into nether blackness like a mouth opened for breath to the air.

One of the men knew the fissure path through which Anton had led Gilda and Ernie, and when they had gone a little way through it, he picked up something which was clinging to a jag of rock, and held it out to Reggie. It was a little rag of a tulle veil, with frivolous black spots all over it. Gilda's lover recognised it at once, and they pressed on till they reached the higher level and the upward track which made for the peak.

Suddenly it broke in a wide crack where a fresh-riven chasm yawned beneath their feet. The earth had breathed too deep and burst its bonds in the night. Even at that moment of intense anxiety Reggie and the others paused to look down into it awe-struck, for there in its hollow side lay what had been the bones of men, still clad in antique armour, black and coated with the rust of centuries.

Again the peones crossed themselves, but Reggie's thoughts went out from the dead to the living. His life was somewhere on the other side of that gaping gulf. He climbed up to one end, and leapt it where it was narrowest, his heart beating violently now, for he felt that he was near to his love. Some fluttering of drapery on a ledge high above led him like a flag, and he scrambled quickly up the slope, leaving the others far behind, for love gave him new strength and lent its own wings to the man's tired feet.

As his head rose above the level of the ledge, a strange sight met his eyes. Gilda was leaning, half kneeling, half sitting, against a rock, and Ernie had fallen asleep, with his head on her knees. On the stone over their heads, wrapped in his puma skin with the ears standing erect, sat Anton like a great grey bat. He had crept back to them at last, thrown by terror of storm and earthquake into one of his strange dumb fits, during which he seemed to understand nothing. A little to one side lay the man they had called Carlos, asleep or dead, his face turned from them.

Reggie gave one cry as he leapt to Gilda's side, and she looked up with parted lips and flaming eyes, all the rosy tide of hope and love flushing into her pale sweet face.

"Reggie," she cried, and her voice rang high in the triumph of justified trust, "oh, I knew you would come!"

He was kneeling beside her, and his strong arms were round her, and she did not seem in the least to mind that he was kissing her in the most bare-faced way before the others, who had reached the spot. Then Ernie awoke, and, fearfully weak and tired, sat up and clasped his arms round Reggie's neck as if he would never undo them again; but he managed to say quite crossly,

"You *was* a time coming, Reggie!"

The other men had stepped to the side of him who lay still with his face turned away. Juan stooped and shook the shoulder, touched the hand, and then looked up and nodded to the officer who stood above him.

"It is him, sir, right enough. He ain't changed much since I first saw him. But he's gone."

Ted moved so as to place himself between the dead and that rejoicing little group.

"And a good thing, too," he said sternly. "My God, what a scoundrel!"

"Well," said the runaway sailor slowly, "he were, and no mistake. But he give me the cattle—I dunnow as that'll make any difference where he's gone. I'll just stay by him and keep the condors off till you can send and fetch him, sir."

One of the peones carried Ernie down. As for Gilda, she never quite remembered how she reached home, but in all the pain and faintness she knew that she was leaning on the arm of her beloved, and that it lifted her over many an obstacle, till, at last and at last, she sank down in her own house, and found Transito putting a glass of wine to her lips. Gilda pushed it towards Ernie, who was terribly spent, poor little man. But when he had drunk, he looked up and said quite cheerily,

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Edmondson!"

Some Dominican brothers went up towards sunset, and brought Carlos Cobos down to their convent, and buried him there, not with dishonour, since they laid him in one grave with the bones of certain brave Spaniards brought to death for their covetousness, even as he was, and gathered now for Christian burial at last.

Gilda would have none of the story spread abroad. "I told him that I forgave —everything," she said simply, "and it was Christmas morning."

When Juan galloped all the way to Santiago that night, very anxious about Manuelita and his establishment on the Alameda, he carried with him a generous present, given with Gilda's own hand, which pressed his rough one warmly as she thanked him for a kindness done long ago to a poor young stranger on the East Slope.

Then she said to Reggie: "You were right, dear—we will go home as soon as you like now. But I am happier than I have

been for years past. My Carlos is my own dear brother once more, and it was not he who was unkind to me. Thank God for that!"

They come out to the old Hacienda every two or three years, and it prospers and is one of the great estates of the country. The place of the Copa de Sangre knows that name no more, for it is now a rich upland meadow dropped like an emerald on the stony breast of the hills. Thither the favourite cows are sent in summer, and it is one of the wonders of that strange land. Gilda knows all about the gold, but she will not have it touched.

"It has done enough harm already," she says, "and we do not need it. Ernie can amuse himself with it by-and-by if he likes."

Ernie has ceased to call Gilda Mrs. Edmondson, or to fight Reggie about her. They are brother and sister to him now—the dearest that ever were—and he spends all his holidays with them, for their home is his. The three are always a little grave, but very happy on the 25th of December, remembering their Cordillera Christmas.

THE END

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